

The Exaltation of the Holy Cross
(Numbers 21:4-9 / John 3:13-17)
14.09.2015

I very rarely look at a calendar, but just yesterday I looked at our community calendar for 2015. It caught my eye as I cleared my desk. The month of September this year is illustrated by a photograph which shows the preacher standing at the ambo of this church proclaiming the message of God's word, the icon of the cross above his head. It struck me that the photograph used is an appropriate image to mark a month at the heart of which is today's celebration of the Triumph of the Cross.

When one looks at the photograph used in the calendar what attracts one's attention, before all else, is the icon of the cross.

I find it significant that the icon of the cross hangs where it does in this church building: raised up above all who proclaim God's word from this place.

The cross speaks to us!

The icon of the cross speaks to us as we look to it.

It reminds us that God's word which is addressed to each one of us today (as indeed it is each and every day), is spoken to us most eloquently through *the Word made flesh*, Christ-Jesus.

What Jesus lived for us on the cross speaks to us more eloquently than any words that might be pronounced or confided to writing.

The cross speaks to us!

At one point in his writings (1 Corinthians 1, 18), St Paul speaks of *the language of the cross*, or *the word of the cross*, or *the message of the cross*, or *the preaching of the cross*... All these translations make the same basic point: the cross speaks!

Clearly, the cross spoke to the apostle Paul, as it has done to so many others who have contemplated its mystery down through the ages. It still speaks to men and women of our own day. It has something to say to us.

On this Solemnity of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, let me suggest that we look to this great Christian symbol, the cross of Jesus, and allow it to speak to us where we are at today.

The cross speaks to us!

Just what does the cross of Jesus want to say to us?

The words that come to me as I look to the cross are **peace and reconciliation, healing and new life**.

These are all **words of love**, of course.

The cross speaks to us of God's love which reconciles and makes peace; His love which heals our wounds and engenders us to new life.

From the cross, before ever opening His mouth to pronounce a word, Jesus proclaims God's love for us.

He also assures us that we have been granted an ability to live our lives lovingly, as He lived His: as a generous gift for all.

Gathered here this morning, aware of each other as we sit in the Lord's presence, aware also of all those people we are carrying in our hearts, aware of those we know and have dealings with in our daily lives, aware of countless others we may never meet or interact with directly, but who are all part of the human family to which we belong, we listen to what Jesus has to say to us from the cross.

Looking down upon us from the cross, Jesus invites us to consider where we stand in all our relationships. I hear Him inviting us to honestly examine the criteria which inspire and guide us in our dealings with others and our thoughts in their regard.

From the cross Jesus speaks to us by His own loving action.

He shows us that we should be living all our relationships out of an open heart and in an attitude of self-giving love.

We might ask: is this how we situate ourselves in our relationships? Are our thoughts, sentiments and attitudes those of Christ-Jesus? Writing to the Philippians, St Paul tells us we *should have in us the same attitudes, sentiments and thoughts as were in Christ*.

Truth be told, are we not so often driven by self-interest, rather than genuine concern for others?

We must ask ourselves: is communion with others what we well and truly long for and work towards?

Where communion is menaced in some way, or already broken, is reconciliation what we aim at and are ready to work for?

We can talk about these things, but if we do not desire them in our hearts, first of all, we will not arrive at the end to which God calls us.

This week and all the coming weeks (if things hold together) political parties in Northern Ireland are committed to *Talks*. If there is no real desire for reconciliation, and a genuine readiness to listen to each other to arrive at that end, there is little point in the parties *talking* yet again.

If only all would ***listen*** to what the Lord Jesus says to us from the cross: ***Be reconciled!***

From the cross Jesus says: *I have reconciled you. Open your hearts to receive the gift I offer you, and, in your turn, offer that same gift to each other.*

Looking down upon us from the cross **Jesus' outstretched arms speak to us**, inviting us to allow ourselves to be reconciled with each other as much as with the Father.

Jesus' outstretched arms bid us to allow ourselves to be drawn into His love and held together in His embrace.

From the cross, as He embraces each one of us, Jesus invites us to embrace each other.

Having reconciled us, Christ invites us to become ministers of His reconciliation in our turn. He asks us to be channels of His reconciling grace. He invites us to build bridges to restore all broken relationships. He calls upon us to move beyond animosity and resentment, to leave aside all bitterness and to dare to rebuild relationships of trust where they have broken down.

If Jesus asks this of us, He also empowers us to live it.

When John's gospel depicts Jesus *giving up His Spirit* upon the cross, it suggests that, at that very moment, the Spirit was poured out upon the disciples for the ministry of reconciliation.

Paul, for his part, hails the cross as *our reconciliation*.

Its contemplation should lead us to desire to arrive at the goal of all reconciliation which is full communion, oneness with each other.

The scroll above Jesus' head upon the icon which hangs in this church reads: *May all be One*. Jesus is depicted in this icon as living His passion for the unity of His disciples and all the scattered children of God. He is depicted as interceding in the flesh for the gathering together of all God's

children in reconciled relationships.

It is as we look to the cross, contemplating Christ reconciling us with the Father and with each other, that we first hear (as yet unspoken, but signified by Jesus' attitude of confident trust) the word *peace*.

Jesus radiates peace as He commends His Spirit to the Father, as He is shown to have done in Luke's Passion narrative.

The word *peace* which will become the greeting of the Risen Lord, while not yet pronounced upon the cross, is spoken into our hearts as we look to the Christ, lifted up, reconciling us by His saving death.

St Paul, for his part, has no qualms about associating the word *peace* with the cross. The apostle speaks of *Christ Himself (being) our peace*. He insists that it was as Jesus was crucified that He showed Himself to be *our peace*.

If we were to look closely at the icon hanging above my head in this church building we would see that it transpires peace. Jesus looks as if He is gently sleeping upon the cross.

Christ is depicted as having found His own deep peace in doing the Father's will as He lives His Sacred Passion.

From the cross this morning the Crucified Lord speaks the word *peace* into our hearts.

His desire is that we welcome the gift of peace He offers us.

He murmurs: *Shalom. Let not your hearts be troubled. My peace I give you. In the world you will know trials and difficulties, but I have overcome the world. Peace. Shalom.*

Jesus wants us to come to know peace in those areas of our lives which are in any way troubled. He wants us to taste His *shalom* at the deepest level of our being.

Christ is with us when we suffer.

The cross is the answer to our cry.

As we look to Jesus lifted up and contemplate His wounded body we also hear the words of Isaiah softly resonate in our hearts with their reassuring message: *By His wounds we have been healed.*

In John's gospel, Jesus lifted up on the cross is likened to the *serpent of bronze raised up in the desert*. Looking to Him we find healing, just as the Israelites were cured of the ill which assailed them in the wilderness.

Perhaps the sickness from which we most need to be healed is the self-destructive condition of unforgiveness, which robs so many of us of health and well-being.

When this ill takes hold of us it really poisons and destroys our lives.

A word Jesus is recorded to have actually spoken upon the cross rings out a clear message to any of us who are struggling with issues around forgiveness.

When Jesus prayed audibly on the cross the words *Father, forgive them*, He showed us that forgiveness is something that is beyond our ability alone. He showed us that it is God alone who can forgive. Our prayer, in echo to Christ's plea, asking the Father to pardon those who have offended us, brings about a certain degree of healing within us since it engages us in the process of forgiveness. To be willing to forgive those who have offended us is to be engaged already in the healing of the wounded relationships which mar our lives.

Finally, the cross speaks to us of new life.

The tree on Calvary's Hill sends us back to the tree in the garden of Eden, which becomes the *tree of*

life in the Book of the Apocalypse.

God's ultimate plan for us and for our world involves our complete healing.

In the Book of the Apocalypse, the apostle John saw a vision of *a new heavens and a new earth*, where this ultimate healing will take place: *And the angel pointed out to me a river of pure Water of Life, clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb...* (All these images speak to us of the cross of Jesus. In John's optic the cross is the Lord's throne. From Christ's open side both blood and water flowed forth.) *On each side of the river grew Tress of Life... the leaves of which were used for medicine to heal the nations.*

Giving and receiving forgiveness is an essential part of our healing. It leads to restored well-being. It give us fresh energy and new life!

Let me draw our reflection to a close by quoting some lines from the writings of Cardinal Martini who suggests that contemplating the cross is equivalent to experiencing the burning bush from which God's voice first spoke to Moses.

In a meditation entitled *The Cross Opens the Way of Life*, Martini writes: *The cross is ever before us. It wants to speak to us, if only we contemplate it with love, drawn by the power of the Spirit Who is the gift of Christ crucified. If we look upon it with awe and affection, the cross becomes an enticing, warm and all-consuming fire.*

The late Cardinal's next remark is important to hear at the beginning of this week of fresh political Talks in Northern Ireland. Some may be tempted to ask the question: can any way through be found to resolve outstanding issues?

Martini continues: *(The cross) asks many things (of us). The cross asks us, our communities, our societies and our cultures to confirm that there do exist paths from the cross to resolve human problems.*

There do exist paths from the cross to resolve human problems!

The Way is that of the Gospel. It is the person of Christ whom we have listened to this morning. Both the Gospel and the person of Christ can be resumed in one word: **love!**

Love turns the Ways of the Cross we walk in this life into the Way that leads to Life!

The icon that hangs in our church depicts Christ still alive upon the cross, His side is not yet pierced by the lance. He is shown thus to be still living His passion *that all may be one.*

The last word I hear the cross speak to us this morning, or rather which I hear Christ speak to us from the cross, is this: *I live. You also shall live!*

Amen!