

The Triumph of the Cross  
(Numbers 21:4-9 / John 3:13-17)  
14.09.2017

This morning we are invited to lift our eyes and look at Jesus *raised* upon the cross. That we should lift our eyes and look to Jesus is a theme already prepared in the Old Testament; it is a theme which runs throughout the Scriptures. One thinks of the prophetic word contained in Isaiah's *Servant Song*: *They will look to the One whom they have pierced*. The call to contemplate the Crucified Christ comes through strongly in John's gospel with its various allusions to Jesus' being *lifted up* upon the cross: *Just as Moses lifted up the serpent of bronze in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up*. Looking to Jesus, elevated and exalted upon the holy rood, humanity is led to experience God's healing grace and abundant peace. The apostle Peter writes, *By His wounds we have been healed*; while Paul for his part states that *Christ's cross is our peace*.

The One lifted up and exalted, appears to our eyes not as a man robed in splendour, but as someone battered and bruised; a person so devoid of glory, one treated so inhumanely, that He is barely recognisable as a man. We contemplate Christ humiliated and shamed, disfigured to the point that people prefer to shield their eyes than look at His unsightly state.

Let me quote an insight which comes to us from Hans Küng's acclaimed work *On Being a Christian: Jesus' unresisting suffering and helpless death, accursed and dishonoured, for His enemies and even His friends, was the unmistakable sign that He was finished and had nothing to do with God. His death on the cross was the fulfilment of the curse of the Law. 'Anyone hanged on a tree is cursed by God.' He was wrong wholly and entirely: in His message, His behaviour, His whole being, His claim is now refuted, His authority gone, His way shown to be false... The heretical teacher is condemned, the false prophet disowned, the seducer of the people unmasked, the blasphemer rejected. The Law had triumphed over this 'gospel'*.

So much for what many of those who looked at Jesus as he agonised and died saw before their eyes, what do we see when we look to the cross today?

Let me immediately introduce a word of caution here...

Let me insist that we are not to be too quick to furnish the correct theological answer to that question. It would be more beneficial to us to dare to sit for a moment simply with what we are given to see at face value.

What we see on the surface is exactly what the onlookers saw: a man robbed of his dignity – someone derided, rejected, shamed, mocked and ridiculed, a man stripped naked to add to His humiliation. Jesus' suffering exposed before all.

Do we really see that?

Few of us have the courage to accept not to mask the reality of crucifixion just a little – if in no other way than by covering Jesus' nudity.

To appreciate what Christ lived for us we have to take on board the shaming objective of crucifixion; we have to muster the courage to recognise the human reality of Jesus' passion, for what it really was, before jumping in with our theological insights. The theological considerations we resort to can be our way or sanitising the cross. It is easier to intellectualise what happened at Calvary than it is to come to grips with it a deeper level of being.

Before we look at what was revealed on Calvary through the lens of the theologian, we have to see it as those who were there saw it. They saw defeat, failure, a painful end in humiliation.

Having really taken this on board, we can now listen to the description of one theologian about what is made manifest at Calvary when we move on to the level of faith. The theologian I use to make my point here is Rosemary Haughton. This woman has written: *The paradox of passion is that the thrust of love seeking love consists in being vulnerable... There is no dignity or shame in the naked suffering of the passion of Jesus. There is only utter vulnerability, a giving which is so absolute.... It is simply love.*

Haughton doesn't force us to choose between the categories of dignity or shame; she brings us to another level altogether: that of love.

In Jesus *lifted up* upon the cross what we contemplate is love made manifest in a very poignant humility.

John's gospel – the gospel which has Jesus articulate poetic words of love so magnificently in His *Farewell Discourse* – speaks of the cross of Jesus as the place of Christ's *enthronement*. For John when Jesus *raised* upon the cross, love was elevated to another plane.

Was there ever a love so great as this? We have Jesus' own word for it: *There is no love greater than this, to give one's life.*

In the optic of the Fourth Gospel the Universal Kingship and Divine Majesty of Jesus is revealed on Calvary. God's reign and the glory that comes with it is one of goodness – a love that knows no bounds. On the cross God's great, wide, open, compassionate, unfathomable love is revealed in Christ-Jesus. The Saviour's arms stretched wide open, His wounded heart presented to our gaze, speak a message that we all need to hear. These images held before our eyes say to us that all the world can find welcome with Christ – no one can or will be turned away.

What John's gospel underlines for us is that Christ's incomparable glory shines through His apparent weakness; the strength of His love is shown in His vulnerability.

Jesus' elevation upon the cross does not raise Him high above us: it draws Him close to us. In a supreme way, it is precisely by His elevation upon the cross on Calvary's Hill, that Christ stoops down to us.

When we come to see God's glory revealed upon the wood of the cross in the way it is made manifest there – not in a crushing manner, but so gently, with such profound humility of heart – then we feel free to approach the *Throne of Grace* without fear of judgement. Doing that, we come to experience a profound healing at every level of our being, a deep pacification of our troubled hearts is offered to us. We are given to savour the fruit of the *Tree of Life* of which the Book of Revelation speaks. As the psalmist puts it, we can *taste and see that the Lord is good.*

In John's vision of things the cross is at one and the same time the place of the revelation of God's glory and our place of healing.

John's Passion Narrative must be read in conjunction with His insight into God's ultimate plan for us spoken of in his Book of Revelation.

In Revelation there are various passages which evoke what happened on Calvary's Hill for us. One stands out for me this morning: the vision given to the seer and recorded for us in Chapter 22 of the Apocalypse, that of the *Tree of Life*.

John speaks in the same context of *the throne of God and of the Lamb* – we have seen that he equates the cross of Jesus with His throne.

The point made in Revelation is that God's ultimate plan for us and for our world involves our complete healing – a healing that comes through forgiveness.

All of us stand in need of healing, for all of us have rebelled and allowed our lives to be poisoned like those who wandered through the desert and grumbled against God. The only thing required of us to experience the healing on offer is to acknowledge our need for the grace proposed to us.

The whole imagery of John's vision in the Book of Revelation – for example, that of crystal clear water – speaks of purification and new life.

At this point we also think of what John's gospel account says when it speaks of the blood and water that flowed from Christ's open side upon the cross: these images also speak of purification and new life. The Johannine *new birth* theme is evoked for us here.

What we see when we look to the cross of Jesus is creation being restored. The cross is the *Tree of Life*. We are brought back to the new Eden – prepared for what will be revealed in the Easter Garden on the morning of the resurrection.

The cross is never the end of our contemplation. The cross always points beyond itself. We are to prolong our contemplation of the tree until we see it in the context of the Easter garden which points to the creation inaugurated by Christ's resurrection.

If John invites us to *look* to Jesus and from those insights come to appreciate that God's ultimate plan for us being one of healing, I think it fair to present Luke's particular take on Jesus' Passion as more of an invitation to *listen* to the words spoken by the Master; to hear Jesus' words during the Passion as containing His teaching on forgiveness.

The final words of my reflection this morning I want to add as a homage to someone who lived and preached the mystery of the cross and resurrection as the source of healing through forgiveness in the latter decades of his life – a period during which we were privileged to know him.

I am thinking of dear friend of our community – the Rev. Bert Armstrong – who was laid to rest last Thursday in Ballymena. Some of you may remember hearing Bert give his testimony at the opening of our church in 2004 – or from the time a few years before that when he preached for the Church's Joint Act of Repentance we organised for Ash Wednesday of the Great Jubilee Year 2000.

Others may know the name Bert Armstrong because it was among the signatories of the initial appeal launched to help our community build this *House of Prayer for all Peoples*, our monastery dedicated to the Holy Cross.

From my experience of Bert's preaching and teaching I recall how he would constantly emphasise the importance of *listening* to the cross.

Up until now we have been looking to the cross, now I propose that we listen to its essential message of reconciliation.

Let me share with you just a few of the words Bert was given to speak when he had to preach at the funeral of his brother and sister-in-law Wesley and Bertha Armstrong who died victims of the Remembrance Day bomb in Enniskillen in 1987.

These words came to him as he said: *after a night listening to the cross.*

*I lay in darkness and listened to the words spoken from the cross. The cross could say so much...*

He pointed out the importance of choosing what to listen to: *You could listen at the cross and hear all the loud voices of evil and as a result act in the wrong way, choosing the path of violent retaliation... Or listen to Jesus and there will come repentance, confession of sin, renewal, a new openness to the power of the Holy Spirit and a witness to the power of the Gospel.*

Bert choose to listen in the latter way. This is what he heard: *Out of death can come the healing of our land. He heard Jesus say to him and to those to whom he was called to minister: Keep your eyes of Me via the cross and the empty tomb. Take my cross as the centre of Salvation (blood shed and Body broken), but remember that you must take it as the principle by which you live.*

*Forgive and you will be forgiven. Though your wound be deep don't make it impossible for them to heal by unforgiveness and bitterness. Listen! He went to: Now that you have seen your way as the way to hell, I am offering you another and I am going to walk with you in a garden and we are going to share for ever. Bert explained that as he listened in the darkness he knew that as a minister of the gospel if those who murdered his brother and sister-in-law turned to him to ask: How can we find a way of hope... Have you a Gospel for us? he would have to offer it. He explained to those to whom he relayed his message: While I might find it hard, as I listened in the darkness I knew that I had to say: yes. He asked himself How can I preach as a Methodist and believe all men can be saved and fail to offer what Jesus offered?*

I hear the words Bert first heard in the darkness of the night and echoed in the subsequent years in his ministry lived in the broad daylight, a message of Christian hope we are invited to hear as words addressed to us. Bert's message is one we are called to live in a special way here at Holy Cross. Once again, I quote our brother who now lives in glory: *Show outstretched arms to the world. Tell people faith is big enough for life and death. As I listened I knew God was in the darkness of the Cross, and now, beyond the agony and suffering there was the dawn of resurrection.*

From the Cross our God reigns.

His cross is our peace.

His cross is nothing less than our life and resurrection.

Let us glory in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen!