

The Exaltation of the Holy Cross
(Numbers 21:4-9 / John 3:13-17)
14.09.2018

We find the following lines in a liturgical meditation written by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI for today's Solemnity: *Today, the Church invites us proudly to lift up the glorious cross so that the world can see the full extent of the love of the Crucified one for humankind, for every man and woman. She invites us to give thanks to God because from a tree which brought death, life burst out anew.*

Some might ask: How could anyone – even from a post-resurrection stance – think of the cross as glorious? Why should the tree that bore upon its arms the Crucified have become so central to Christian spirituality? Since Jesus rose from the dead, why was the empty tomb not retained as the great symbolic image of Christianity?

Surely, the humiliation and shame of the cross is something we should want to forget rather than recall; something we should want to shelter ourselves from thinking about and screen from other people's view, instead of opting to contemplate it ourselves and present to others as the symbol of Christian hope in which we are called to glory. How could the apostle Paul go as far as to say that he found his joy in being able to glory in the cross? How can we dare to echo those sentiments? Did not the Son of God appear before the eyes of all who looked on at what He endured on Calvary's Hill as one vulnerable and disfigured, humiliated and shamed? What is glorious about that? What is glorious about the cross is that it speaks to us of the extent to which God loves us; it manifests to us the lengths to which the Lord went to display His infinite love for us. The cross shows us that Jesus identified Himself fully with us in our vulnerability and disfigurement, our humiliation and shame. Jesus appears to us as One who *reigns from the tree* when we come to appreciate His cross for what it really is: the supreme revelation of God's love. Again and again John's gospel presents the cross to us in this light, going as far to develop a theology which actually presents the cross as nothing less than *Christ's Throne of Glory*. In John's thought, Jesus *lifted up from the earth, reigns from the tree*. The cross appears as the new *Tree of Life*. This thought which John introduces at the outset of his gospel is one which he develops as the story progresses and which finally comes to its accomplishment in his apocalyptic vision shared with us in his Book of Revelation.

A striking image which illustrates what I have just been saying comes to mind. As I speak, I can see with my mind's eye the wonderful mosaic which adorns the Basilica of San Clemente in Rome – a church of which the Irish Dominican friars are the custodians. This work of art will be known to many of us.

In the apse of San Clemente what we are presented with is an image of the cross bursting out of the tree of life which is at its base. The context in which the cross *Tree of Life* is set is absolutely teeming with vitality. What we are given to contemplate is nothing less than a grace of *new creation*. What is presented to us by the mosaic is a sacred space wherein everything and everyone is held together in perfect harmony – as was the case before our first parents' fall in the Garden of Eden. Where the cross is shown to penetrate the earth a luxuriant tree bursts forth, it sends out branches far and wide, reaching all categories of people: apostles, teachers and preachers; men and women from every walk of life... nobles and ordinary folk, hunters, shepherds, servants. Alongside all these different categories of people, many kinds of animals and forms of bird life are found; varied vegetation and plants also figure in the scene. Flowing water is a very important feature in the whole portrait of this new creation: the water seen to flow in the mosaic is undoubtedly symbolic of those waters of rebirth which streamed from Christ's open side as He hung upon the cross. What is

proclaimed here in visual form is what the Scriptures teach: namely, that with the cross of Jesus *all things are made new*. It could be said that John's gospel, which begins like the opening of the Book of Genesis with its famous poetic Prologue, is the story of the *New Creation*, at the heart of which stands the cross the *Tree of Life*.

In a remarkable way the San Clemente mosaic bears visual testimony to the mystical meditations of people like the 13th century preacher St Bonaventure. This great Franciscan Doctor of the Church is one among others who saw the cross to be the perfect *Tree of Life*. Bonaventure writes in one of his master works *The Tree of Life*, a collection of meditations upon the life of Jesus: *Picture in your mind a tree whose roots are watered by an ever-flowing foundation that becomes a great living river with four channels to water the garden of the entire Church. From the trunk of this tree, imagine that there are growing twelve branches that are adorned with leaves, flowers and fruit. Imagine that the leaves are the most effective medicine to prevent and cure every kind of sickness, because the word of the cross is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. Let the flowers be beautiful with a radiance of every colour and perfumed with the sweetness of every fragrance, awakening and attracting the anxious hearts of men of desire. Imagine that there are twelve fruits, having every delight and the sweetness of every taste. This fruit is offered to God's servants to be tasted so that when they eat, they may always be satisfied, yet never grow weary of its taste. This is the fruit that took its origin from the Virgin's womb and reached its savoury maturity on the tree of the cross under the midday heat of the Eternal Sun, that is, the love of Christ. In the garden of the heavenly paradise – God's Table – the fruit is served to those who desire it. (...) Although this fruit is one and undivided, it nourishes devout souls with varied consolations in view of its varied states, excellence, powers and works.*

Note that in the text I've just quoted that Bonaventure speaks of *the word of the cross*, not just its wood. It is as if the great Doctor of the Church wants us to hear the cross speak to us at the same time as he invites us to look to it as the *Tree of Life*.

I believe that Christ beckon to us from the cross. He speaks to us as we look to Him. He invites us to draw near to Him in trust so that we may obtain the grace of healing and new life for which we long and which we need. The Lord wills to share this gift with us. From the cross I hear Jesus say to us: 'Come to me and you will live by the fruit I give you from this tree. The fruit you see here is my great love for you. Savour this love. Take and eat the fruit of the tree which is My Very Self'.

St Ephrem and other Fathers of the Church speak of Christ *gently falling from the tree like a ripened fruit* – fruit given to us to eat and savour for our health and well-being.

Many of the great saints who looked to the cross heard it speak to them. One thinks of Francis of Assisi among others.

As Olivetan monks here at Holy Cross we think of our own St Bernard Tolomei. The cross our Father Bernard Tolomei contemplated spoke to him. That same cross speaks to me and to all of us who kneel in its presence in the *Chapel of the Sanctissima* at Monte Oliveto Maggiore when we halt there to pray quietly in its presence. Before this cross our community received its official blessing before being sent to Ireland to found this monastery of the Holy Cross. The cross which spoke to Bernard came from Arezzo – a place central to the saint's life story. It was the Bishop of Arezzo who clothed Bernard Tolomei in the Benedictine habit. Arezzo is interesting to our understanding of the cross as the *Tree of Life*. In that city a whole thought developed – which was also expressed in art-form – which emphasised the cross to be the *Tree of Life*. I think it fair to suggest that Bernard would have been aware of this theological reflection and somewhat influenced by it.

Interestingly, the icon at the back of this church which depicts St Bernard Tolomei along with St Benedict holding up the Monastery of the Holy Cross – sustaining it by their prayer – sets

the monastery in an idyllic setting. It is portrayed to be sitting in a Garden of Paradise. But, with realism, the icon symbolises for us the fact that access to this Garden of Paradise comes only through traversing a rough and rocky desert path. We are reminded thus that the way to the garden in which the Tree of Life is planted is a *Via Dolorosa*. A certain *Via Dolorosa* (*way of the cross*) will be part of all our lives at some stage or other – and often many times. I am not talking about difficult ways we invent for ourselves, but passages which life's circumstances lead us through, most often, despite ourselves.

Just as Jesus did for the Emmaus pilgrims, after having walked part of the way with Cleopas and his companion, so, with time, the Risen Christ will lead us to understand how the experience of suffering was necessary for us. He will lead us to recognise that it was the way we had to take to come to share in Christ's own glory. In the same manner as the Risen Jesus could say to those downcast disciples on the Emmaus road, *Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer and so enter into His glory?*, so, with hindsight, He will surely lead us to understand, that some of the most difficult passages of our lives were important stepping stones to bring us to where He would have us be, where we are today, with Him.

Gathered here this morning we are invited to lift our eyes and look to the cross, to see it as the *Tree of Life* from which a new life genesis forth for us. Using the words of the Sacred Liturgy we are invited to cry out: *Ave Crux. Spes Unica. Hail, Holy Cross. Singular Hope*. What a strong confession of faith is constituted by those words! Making those words our own, we affirm our belief that the cross is more than dead wood; we affirm that it is a living word that calls us to new life. If *by the word God spoke* at the beginning of time *all that is came into being*, so by the word He spoke through His Son's life-giving death, lived out of love for us on Calvary's Hill, we are all of us recreated. We are brought to new life today and every day.

May the cross the new *Tree of Life* be planted in our hearts this morning, so that it may come to its full flowering and find expression in a marvellous fruit of love enfolded in our daily existence. As we allow the cross to take root in our lives and grow within us, I think what we will find is that we will be led to bear in abundance *the fruits of the Spirit which are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*. These characteristics are the product of the Holy Spirit's work in a life committed and submitted to God. In John's gospel it is already from the cross the *Tree of Life* that Jesus is depicted to have given His Spirit to the Church.

What are we meant to do to cultivate these fruits of the Spirit in our lives? Well, nothing other than trust in God's grace really. The Greek word used for fruit in the Galatians text I have quoted makes the point that the things listed are all a product of God's labour and not a result of our human effort. Just as a tree bears fruit by means of God's silent activity behind the scenes, so we experience the fruits of the Spirit coming to flower and full fruition in our lives by means of God's discreet and gentle power moving quietly within us. God works in our weakness, I would hasten to add, echoing Paul's conviction stated elsewhere. Our part is simply to entrust our life to the Lord. As we do so, all other forces gradually lose their grip upon our captive lives. We find ourselves released little by little from their hold upon us.

With *joy* and *peace* we overcome the pain of our broken past. With *love, kindness, goodness* and *faithfulness* we restore our relationships and make amends where needed. With *patience* we persevere through the difficult times – including those which still lie ahead. With *self-control* we hold firm against temptation and stand against that tendency which is there within each one of us to relapse into our old, frequently self-destructive, modes of behaviour.

Let us pray for the grace we need to live the mystery of the cross in our lives day after day. Let us implore from God the gentle strength required to dare to live whatever love demands of us, remembering that to do so will certainly demand of us a sharing in the cross at different stages along the way, for *there is no greater love than to give one's life*.

Having listened to the Sacred Scriptures what we hear is that the word we are called to echo, the word to which we are called to give flesh and blood in our lives, was expressed supremely in action when Jesus was *lifted up from the earth* on Calvary's Hill out of love for all God's People.

Amen!