

A Reflection on the Triumph of the Holy Cross

One way for us to think of the Cross is as the *badge* of those of us who uphold the Christian faith: the Cross is the sign and symbol of our *faith* – and specifically of our faith, guided by *hope* and expressed through *love*, in the power of God to defy the darkness of evil and death so that all who are caught under their spell may be liberated – redeemed – and brought back into the embrace of God. That is why it is fitting for us to see the



symbolism of the Cross as something glorious, *triumphant* – the same reason that we describe the Friday of the Passion of the Lord specifically as *Good Friday*. By expressing solidarity with all who experience pain and death, Jesus Christ, *on the cross*, is, and can only ever be, a source of hope. And it is a hope which cannot be subverted by *anything* – because ‘the light shines in the darkness, and *the darkness did not overcome it*’ (John 1.5). In Matthew’s Gospel – the version from which our Sunday Gospel readings are taken this year – the crucifixion is described like this:

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o’clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, ‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?’ that is, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ When some of the bystanders heard it, they said, ‘This man is calling for Elijah.’ At once one of them ran and got a sponge, filled it with sour wine, put it on a stick, and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, ‘Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.’ Then Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many, Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, ‘Truly this man was God’s Son!’

Matthew 27.45-54

Just as at the mid-point of the Gospel, as we have read during the last few weeks, the question is clarified and made explicit (Matthew 16.13):

Who do people say that the Son of Man is?

– so here, at the foot of the cross, there are some who question whether Jesus really is a prophet or not; while others – including the centurion charged with watching over the crucified body – can see that Jesus *must* be *more than* a prophet, indeed, ‘*God’s Son!*’ As if to underline it, *the entire cosmos shakes*. The Holy of Holies in the temple opens up so that all may *see right in*. Those trapped in *death* (a condition of ‘*stasis*’ or paralyzed stillness) are now *resurrected* (‘*anastasis*’, or the renewal of movement and dynamism and life). This is the substance of the *triumph* which we celebrate this week, what makes John describe the Passion as ‘*glorious*’ (cf John 17.1-5). It is why our faith and hope and love are confirmed and clarified by Christ crucified, rather than challenged and just left hanging.

Some of us find it easier to make sense of all this than others. For some of us, it is precisely in moments of suffering and pain that the *Presence of God* has come most clearly to us, so that it is no longer our *human weakness* that we experience and remember, but the *power of God* in whom our own fragility is gathered and made robust. For others of us, darkness and distress remain more of a subversive challenge. We want to *hope* and to *trust* that our faith makes sense, but we are left with a sense of *uncertainty* which can be enormously unsettling. And sometimes God seems *absent*, just when we thought that we needed him most of all.

This is why the Apostle exhorts us – especially those of us who *have* caught a glimpse of the reasons why the Cross has been described as glorious and triumphant and life-giving – to be extremely gracious in our support of those whose faith in any way seems weak or incomplete.

‘*Welcome those who are weak in faith,*’ he bids us, although we must not let this become a pretext for endless theological disputes or gestures of theological one-upmanship (Romans 14.1). Instead:

For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

Romans 14.9

May this be the basis of our own faith today, guided and inspired by the vision of the Holy Cross, our hope, our guide, and our inspiration.

The image shows the centurion at the foot of the cross declaring Jesus truly to be God’s Son in a fragment of 15th wall painting which survives in the Coventry Charterhouse.