

## *Down and out..... Love on the Cross*



*My holding cross, held, touched, kissed and stained with lipstick*

I was once told that it is not legal to hold Church worship without a cross in the building. I have never checked whether this is true, but I hope it is.

The cross is the centre of our faith.

Only Christianity is surreal enough to take a method of mass execution, public humiliation and shame – never mind religious cursing – as its symbol. But then only Christianity has a God that gets physically right in there in the muddle and struggle of human brokenness and misunderstanding and turns it into a source of grace, and a touching place of hope. Who says...

*I know, I know, I meet you there. Bring it to me. And together we can go through this. When Jesus said 'I will never leave you' – he meant I will be at every single Cross, and I will carry you through.*

The two sides of the Cross: Good Friday, made irretrievably one with Easter. You can't experience darkness, Jesus says, without finding me there, and I promise I will bring you through.

But maybe too, we can't experience the light of Easter without facing Good Friday. Without being honest about ourselves, our lives, about the society in which we are part.

Without laying it at the foot of the cross, nailing it up there for Jesus to redeem, and guide us through.

In our reading today, the Israelites were trying to make a community, and struggling with human frustrations, pains and jealousies; angry with God, full of doubt. The serpents were a sign of that – biting, poisoning, a reminder of the loss of Eden - the serpent-voice that makes us think we are gods; self-saving, self-judging - bringing shame and blame and pain. Put it on a pole, says God. Lift it up where you can see it, reflect on it. Lift your eyes up to where I can heal you. Sometimes we need to take a good look at what is poisoning us, and destroying our society, reflect and be healed.

Later, Jesus is raised up... human brokenness and violence raised us for us to gaze upon, to reflect, to be healed. *Just as Moses lifted up the serpent, says Jesus, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.* God's grace and life literally flowing as we come to realise his love, and our need.

Jesus' redeeming love on the Cross is a physical reality. It's about touch, and blood, flesh, breath and creation. It speaks to us, as so many Church symbols do, without words. It is a Body Prayer.

The Body of Jesus hung there, getting inside death and sorrow and praying his love, his promise, his life. It's a prayer for the body. From the Body. A wordless prayer, that speaks of a love with no limits.

The downward line of God's incarnation – **down** from heaven, meeting us in the dust of creation, rooting into all human experience. And **out** - the horizontal line .... Stretching wide ... encompassing all creation, drawing it into his hug, his love.

A whole new meaning to down and out.

God meets us, down and out. That's where we find him.

I know that however hard I try, I am not strong enough on my own. I need a God who will come down to me and lift me up in **his** strength. I need a God who will widen our gaze to see the brokenness and poison within society and community, through his redeeming grace.

Take up your cross, says Jesus. Follow me. My cross is yours, and yours is mine. I will make the burden light.

We are given the Cross for our own at Baptism, signed invisibly on our foreheads, claiming us for all life brings. Drawn physically on to the body, in oil, pressed from the goodness of Creation. We sign with the Cross too in the rites at the end of life, writing into body and soul the deep truths of Easter as we prepare someone to cross that threshold. At funerals I sign the cross on the coffin and as a blessing over the grave. It has a deep physical sacramental power - God's power to lift and redeem.

It is why the Church throughout the ages has taught us to make the sign of the Cross. Have you ever noticed how often we share in this sign in the mass? In a usual mass, I make it about 14 times. A body prayer that holds and blesses us without words, deeper than understanding.

When we make the sign of the cross, we do two things. We claim it for ourselves, and we proclaim it to the world. Down and out – drawing God's love down to us, and sending it out into the world.

We make it as our prayer that his cross be ours. That his love and compassion and protection enfold us, dwell within us, and flow through us to others.

The traditional way of making the sign of the cross was to bring together two fingers and a thumb – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The two parts (fingers and thumb) – reminding us of the Divinity and Humanity of Jesus... and to touch all that to ourselves – mind, stomach (where all we are nourished by goes), heart and lungs. God be our all in all.

You'll see Christians cross themselves in prayer, blessing and protecting, asking Jesus to make his cross their own – his Good Friday, his Easter. You'll see Christians in some communities cross themselves when ambulances go past – praying for others that physical holding love – proclaiming it into a world that needs it.

This is why we cross ourselves at the beginning of the mass – 'God be in our loving and our giving ourselves anew to your love'. And at the absolution – 'God lift us from the darkness into the light and make us anew part of your Eastering in the world'. Why we cross ourselves at the gospel – 'God be the cross-shaped love in our understanding of your Word, make it live in us – in mind and heart and speech'. And at the Benediction – 'blessed is he who comes on a donkey, comes to the cross ... come in us in your love, come through us into the world'. It's why we cross ourselves as we gaze up at the elevated host – or prepare to receive communion – 'Jesus, as the serpent was lifted up, lift up what is broken in us, and meet it with your Easter. May your love be ours'.

It's why we process the Cross and don't move anywhere without following it. The Cross goes first, the shape through which we look at Love, at Scripture, at Life, at journeys. At being human. At the love of God.

This is why we wear the Cross. It's why we touch the Cross, why we kiss the Cross. Not because we love it, for itself. Not because we adore a piece of wood, a symbol of torture. But because Jesus tells us we will find his love there. And as we love him, and draw his love into our bodies, breath to breath, body to body, we will make it our own.

When did you last kiss a cross? Why not try it? Ask God's Body to speak to your body, through the mystery of sign, symbol and sacrament. Know you kiss through that wood,

and Jesus kisses you back, right on all the bits that hurt. Kiss the cross, and know Jesus takes your kiss, and puts it right where it hurts... down and out, all over the world.

This Holy Cross Day, why not reclaim the Cross. Jesus Did.

Draw in his love... breathe it down.... Breathe it out.

In the love of God, † Father, Son and Holy Spirit.