

Lent 3B SFX 2023

In the Byzantine tradition, this third Sunday of Lent is devoted to the **Adoration of the Cross**. A tray of flowers and sweet basil surround an image of the cross which is then processed around the church to the ancient hymn we sing on Good Friday: *“Holy God, Holy Mighty One, Holy Immortal One, have mercy on us.”*

I have always been interested in Christian art. The art of a particular period tells us so much about what people believed, how they prayed, and what was in their hearts. Where do we find the oldest Christian art, that touches the faith and belief of the early Church? The answer is normally the Catacombs in Rome, where Christians expressed their faith in wonderful frescoes, paintings on the walls.

But one thing you won't find there is a depiction of **Jesus on the Cross**. For the first few centuries no-one depicted the crucifixion, it was too fresh in people's memory, too painful, too scandalous. To die on the cross was not only humiliating, but a slow and agonizing experience – sometimes lasting days. The most terrible thing you could see in Roman times would be the image of a condemned criminal, a man in literally excruciating pain. That is where we get the word from – **excruciating** – *ex-crucis* – from the Cross, the very worst a man could suffer.

What is the oldest image we have of the Cross? One found on the Palatine Hill in Rome – where the Caesars had their great palaces, or at least in the servant's quarters where someone was mocking the faith of a fellow slave. It was in the 2nd Century, and a slave had scratched a graffito on the wall showing a man worshiping a crucified man with the head of a donkey. The oldest image we have of the Crucifixions was **the meant as an insult**, and brings out **the scandal of the Cross**.

Crucifixion not abolished until the 4th Century – by Constantine. One of the first surviving public image of Jesus's crucifixion was on the fifth-century wooden doors of the Basilica of Santa Sabina, which is located nearby on the Aventine Hill in Rome. We are used to seeing a cross, but it took approximately **400 years for Jesus's crucifixion to become an acceptable public image**.

And this is why it is strange the Apostle Paul could write, *“We preach a crucified Christ.”* How could he possibly present the dreadful cross as the centrepiece of his proclamation? He could do so only because he knew for the Christians the cross had become a sign of God's love, God's forgiveness, God's justice.

What was a thing of horror, had become a sign of victory. This is why his exaltation of the cross is a sort of taunt to Rome and all of its brutal descendants down through the ages: *“You think that scares us? God has conquered that!”* And this is why, to this day, Christians boldly hold up an image of the humiliated, tortured Jesus to the world. What they are saying is, *“We are not afraid.”* *“Behold the wood of the Cross on which hung the Saviour of the world. Come let us adore”* we hear on Good Friday. The cross was a sign of Roman power, but the first Christians understood it as a sign of **God's love had broken that power**. St Paul had met the Risen Christ and he knew that the love of God is **more powerful than anything in the world**.

We can say, with Paul, "I am certain that neither death nor life, neither angels nor principalities, neither height nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38-39).

Today the immediate horror is gone, and the Crucifixion is often portrayed as something **beautiful**, and we can talk about a crucifix as objects of beauty. How can the Cross be beautiful? Is suffering beautiful? Is a representation of suffering beautiful? While our instinctive reaction is to say "No" we immediately realise that the answer is "Yes." The suffering is not beautiful, but the love it represents surely is.

When we look at the Cross we look beyond the suffering and see the love.

The mediaeval mystic **Julian of Norwich** had a series of extraordinary revelations on the love of God. In one she saw many agonizing, physical details of the passion of Jesus -pains beyond power to describe - but she says: *the love which made him suffer is as much greater than his pain as heaven is greater than earth.* And our redemption is so great a joy to him that he counts as nothing his agony and passion, his cruel and shameful death.

When we see the Passion, **we see the love.** This is not something that has emerged from the perspective of time, it is something the Evangelists have stated from the very beginning. **St Mark's Gospel** gives us the **brutal realism of the Crucifixion**, but **St John's Gospel** helps us see **the cross as something beautiful, a moment of glory, an exaltation.** "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son."

These are not two contradictory theologies, but the same reality from different perspectives. From an earthly perspective this is cruel barbarism. What the world saw on that first Good Friday was all of human dysfunction, all the darkness of the world poured out on him and yet Jesus swallows it up with the phrase - *Father forgive them, they know not what they do.*

From the perspective of the Resurrection this is Christ's hour of glory. As the Church Father **Origen** puts it: "What was this suffering that from the beginning he underwent for our sake? It was the passion of love. He endures a passion of love." *Origen In Ezechilem homilia 6.6.* The passion of Jesus displayed in the Gospel today in his zeal for God's House.

Sr Wendy Beckett, the art nun said: "I find it painful to look at a crucifixion. The only ones I like are those that show in death the resurrection. Because that is what it is always about. He passed through death and out again."

The work of the Church is to **hold up** the Cross of the Crucified Jesus as a challenge to the injustice and hatred of the world. **We hold up** a sign to the world of a love that has conquered death, put paid to hatred.