

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Good Friday; 30 March 2018
St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster

On the Cross

Last Sunday we celebrated the Liturgy of the Palms, welcoming Jesus into Jerusalem with joy and excitement. You can go to visit the old city of Jerusalem today: it must be amazing to have been there last week for Palm Sunday.

Last night at Maundy Thursday we remembered the Last Supper that Jesus shared with his disciples and which we remember every time we share the Eucharist. Some of us stayed after to watch for a time with Jesus in the garden, even as Jesus' disciples did in Gethsemane. Today there are sites which lay claim to be the room in which Jesus and his disciples celebrated in the Last Supper. It's hard to know. But Gethsemane is still there. It's still a garden, though much shrunken, and there are some Olive trees there that are very, very old.

Tonight, on Good Friday, we remember the passion and death of our Lord. There are some competing sites in Jerusalem claiming to be the place where this happened. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre seems to have the earlier claim to authenticity. You can believe or not, as you please, whether that was actually THE SPOT where Jesus was crucified and then buried. But two millenia of Christian pilgrims have made that spot holy with their prayers and veneration. Pilgrimage to the site of our Lord's passion, kneeling down to reach your hand in and touch the rock said to have supported Jesus' cross, is a moving experience.

To an outsider, Christian veneration of the cross might seem odd. Our baptismal covenant calls us to respect the dignity of every human being. Any form of torture, from crucifixion on down to water-boarding and extended periods of solitary confinement, are dehumanizing and constitute a rejection of the image of God in a person. So why would we choose an instrument of torture and capital punishment, a symbol of colonialism and the ruthless subjugation of conquered peoples, as the symbol of our faith? Why would we wear a reminder of bloody, pierced flesh, hyperextended joints, breaking bones, and slow asphyxiation around our necks and decorate our homes with it? Why would we choose to inscribe the emblem of this cruel, pagan practice on the covers of our prayer books and even tattoo it on our bodies?

If I was talking about any group of people other than Christianity, you might think I was describing some kind of nihilistic death cult.

The cross is an ugly symbol, and it serves to connect to all that is ugly in our lives.

Some of us have lost loved ones, long ago or very recently, and the pain remains present to us. Some of us have lost love and the one whom we thought loved us may or may not remain inconveniently present in our lives! Some of us have been hurt by random chances, some of us have been wounded by thoughtless words or deeds, and some of us have been torn down by intentional and well-placed attacks. Actually, probably all of us have experienced all of these things. We have been disappointed by our own failures, disappointed by people and institutions who have failed us, and disappointed by apparent failures in the structure of the universe. We have at times found our prayers unanswered by a God who seems silent and distant. We have found the world to be cruel, unjust, and uncaring.

The cross is the symbol of all that hurts us. The cross is where our Lord Jesus Christ says to us, “Yeah, I know what you mean. I hurt that way, too.” We read the passion today because it reminds us the cross is not just about physical pain. Jesus experienced the betrayal, failure of civic systems, and injustice that come to all of us in varying ways. Jesus has experienced pain. And the way out that Jesus modeled was not one of escape, but of walking right into the pain and through it, trusting that God prevails in the end.

Likewise, the cross is the symbol of all our offenses. All the shame we carry around with us, all the guilt. The times we have been cruel or careless or oblivious. Our selfishness. All the ways in which we fail. Jesus was expected to change the world: his disciples anticipated great things. He let them down. What they got was a cross and a dead Jesus. On the cross, Jesus shows us that victory is God’s, not ours. Even crucifixion, being tortured and killed by an uncaring government, did not hinder God’s work through Jesus, but rather brought it forward to completion. There is a way through all your failures, all my failures, and it doesn’t consist in running away from them. We are invited to walk right through them, trusting that God prevails in the end.

Yes, the cross is an odd symbol for a people to take on. It is not the logical choice for a way of life that claims to be concerned with love and hope and peace. It's a little perverse that way, like those who embrace styles of dress and symbol that speak of death and nihilism. Often people embrace those styles to shock and to stimulate and to proclaim that they themselves are so brimming over with life that even death holds no threat for them.

That's how Christians are! The cross is a symbol of our ability to face our hurts: at times with tears and at times non-chalantly. Because those hurts won't be the final word in our lives. The cross is a symbol of our ability to face our failures, sometimes with great pain and regret, but always confident that those failures are not the final words in our lives.

The cross is a symbol of death, but as Christians we are defiant. Death is not the final word. Death for us is only a passage, a waypoint along the journey. The cross was not the end of Jesus: the cross demonstrated there is no end for Jesus. And if we are found in Jesus, then we know that there is no end for us: but eternal life in the Kingdom of God.

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