

Today is Holy Cross Day. The origins of this feast day are interesting, it has a fascinating history, but it also happens to serve well as a conclusion to the past two Sundays and what we have dealt with in those sermons. Two weeks ago, we heard that God is always working towards the good of His people, and this truth, this reality cannot be judged by what the physical eye sees, or by what our physical life and condition in this world experiences. Last week focused especially on how God works toward our good through the specific crosses, the sufferings we are given and bear, custom made for us. That we can speak clearly and directly, bluntly of them. And also, God works to give us particular relief, sometimes in this life, ultimately, through our crosses, borne patiently in faith, we are brought into the perfection of eternal life with Him.

Holy Cross Day brings these truths together in a really wonderful way. Our Lord Jesus teaches us how to view the cross, His and our own. He shows how it is that we can believe such things, how we can possibly see God working His divine and good purposes for us through discomfort, pain, death, and sorrow.

This past week we were confronted with much of that as several great evils were on display. Not simply that our sense of being able to discuss and disagree in a civil, non-violent manner seems to be ripped away more and more, but more ultimately, the command by the Giver of Life: “You shall not murder.” Many of us saw a young refugee’s life violently taken away on a train as fellow passengers simply looked on. A political spokesman, an unashamed confessing Christian, murdered in cold blood in front of his wife and friends, and then satanic ghouls displaying their delight in it. And as if that were not enough, we marked 24 years since passenger planes were turned into weapons against our nation and its people, countless lives and the course of the world, irreparably changed.

For many, such evils – and that is what they are, inexcusable, unjustifiable violations of the law and decency – are occasions to blaspheme: to mock God, and those who believe in and cry out to Him. Such scoffing is unworthy of our attention today. It is rather to those who are perplexed, to those who trust in God, believe in Him, and want to know what possible good is there, to those Christians who in weakness are tempted to challenge God and put Him in the defendant’s chair, that I speak today.

Jesus teaches us how to understand the cross, both His and ours. Greeks come seeking Him. They long to see Him. This is not simply the seeing of being able to lay eyes on Him. This is how we speak when we wish to have a more serious, intimate encounter. “May I see you?” And Jesus then responds by speaking of His glorification, but it is not the glorification of heavenly might, nor even of worldly power and splendor. His glorification is His being lifted up. If you would see Him, you must see Him as the crucified One, lifted up, it is there that He draws all men to Himself. John comments for us, spells it out, makes clear that He’s talking about His death. That might be hard for us to grasp, but immediately after today’s reading, we see that the crowd Jesus is speaking to understands perfectly.

It continues right after, “**So the crowd answered Him, ‘We have heard from the Law that the Christ remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up?’**” (Jn 12:34a). They know Jesus is talking about crucifixion, suffering, death. And so how can He be the Christ, the Anointed One of God, who must reign forever? How can good, deliverance, salvation, come if God’s chosen Savior, His own Son, is lifted up to die?

That is the stumbling block for the Jews, that the Royal King Messiah should suffer. It is the greatest offense to Judaism and Islam, that Almighty God should join our weak flesh, should have to endure the scorn and shame of death on a cross. It is foolishness to Greeks, to the wise of the world, that a cross, an instrument of torturous death, is the glory of this crucified One, is our boast and highest comfort, is, as St. Paul says, the sum total of our preaching.

But this is how God redeems the world. Not in an all-powerful snap of the fingers, nor setting up a mighty earthly kingdom for His chosen, free from economic want or foreign occupation, not in the avoidance of all pain and discomfort, but in satisfying the just accusation that would forever separate us from God and one another, in doing for all humanity what no human can do, in going into death as that single seed buried in the earth, to raise up countless living grains. No farmer goes about mourning over the seed that is lost as it is planted in the earth. It is buried in confidence and hope that it will yield abundant fruit. That is how our Lord speaks of His death.

Do not stumble over the offense, the indignity, which the Son of God must suffer. His suffering is not to be judged by the appearance, but by what He is accomplishing through His it. Here the serpent who once overcame humanity, made it subject to death by a tree is overcome by the Son of God dying on a tree. Thus the cross is the most glorious event. Out of His death comes the life of the world.

Do not deem it foolish, too good to be true, a fable for old women and children. Again and again the Scriptures prophesy of this marvelous working of God. The Servant of the Lord would be high and lifted up, stricken, smitten, and afflicted, bruised for our transgressions, pierced for our iniquities. The Seed of the Woman would crush the head of the Serpent, yet suffer His heel to be bruised. It was the very instrument of suffering and death to which the children of Israel were to look, high and lifted up, and they would live.

The glorious, life-giving cross of our Lord shows you the wisdom of God, shows you how He works to save you, first and foremost, in the death of His Son for you. Secondly, how He is always at work in this world, in your life, to use all things to draw you to Himself. That when all is well, prosperous, abundant health, and joyous, you see your treasure and life not in these things but in Him.

And when there is evil, poverty, sickness, and sorrow, you would be driven to Him, to find your life in Him. That even when evil seems ascendant, you know it has already been defeated, these are but the death throes of a beaten enemy. When money and possessions are gone, your true riches are in heaven. When you are sick, and even when you are at death's door, you have He who is the resurrection and the life, and whoever believes in Him will never die. And when you are sorrowful, you have the One who gives eternal joy, a joy that no one can take from you.

It is the cross of our Lord that teaches us how to understand things. There is horror, sadness, and injustice. That is present in our Lord's Passion, there is pain there, and these are also present in our lives. But through that, at work hidden under these things, is our life, joy, and greatest consolation. And so even in our own smaller horrors, sadness, injustice, and pain, you have what cannot be undone by these things, cannot be taken away. Rather they drive you all the more to He who was crucified for you, who has already conquered all your foes, in whom you have life. And so even when you die and are buried, you will be laid to rest in hope, in the sure confidence that as it already is for our Lord, so it will be for you and all who believe in Him.