

Pastor T.C. Arnold
Holy Cross Day
John 12:23
September 14th, 2014

We Christians know the cross to be a symbol of our faith. In various places in the Scriptures, we also know to cross to be understood in different ways. The Holy Cross is a curse, as it says in Deuteronomy chapter twenty-one, *“Anyone who is hung on the tree is under God’s curse.”* God’s people know the shame and unacceptability of the cross. Yet, at times, the Word shows us how there is a double meaning – a special meaning for those who know and believe. For example, we hear in the Epistle reading, *“For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”*

In the two hymns chosen for today, the ones we have already sung, we heard, “Lift High the Cross,” which delivers the message that we glory in that symbol of death – that we put it before us, that we show it, **proclaim it, “tell all the world adore His sacred name.”** And then there is that sermon hymn where we repeat the words, **“Christ crucified, I come... yet now to thee with contrite tears, Christ crucified I come... For cleansing, though it be through pain, Christ crucified I come.”**

Even in the Gospels we see this. In Matthew, Mark and Luke the cross is a symbol of liberation in some ways, and emblem of death in others, and an identification with the poor and downtrodden. We don’t have to go all that deep into the Word of God, these accounts of the story of Jesus, to see how the Holy Cross is portrayed – bloody, murderous, painful. Perhaps it is this way at times we identify our lives – our struggles, our misery, the news of the world, the bad news we got this past week. For sure it is all of these things.

But then there is the Gospel of John, and he portrays the cross in a different way. Through the words of Jesus the cross is made to be a throne. *“The hour has come,”* says Jesus, *“for the Son of Man to be glorified.”* Glorified? On a cross? Jesus says again, *“Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.”* And indeed He would – through death the Lord is glorified. Because His death means our life, Lift High the Cross. As you can see, the cross can have us reflect on that which is heavy for us to carry in life and also that which has already been carried for us as Jesus has glorified the meaning of a tree of execution.

Today is Holy Cross Day and this is an ancient day of celebration. I like this day because as we focus on the symbol of our faith, we can reflect on our own lives, our own situations, our own circumstances and see how, at times, the cross is heavy to carry – its burdens are many. And then at other times that cross salves our festering wounds, binds them up, heals us and makes us whole in the Lord again. The cross can be both things and we know it to be both. Sometimes we can see it clearly in our lives and other times we may be searching for where in the world it went.

For example, have you ever looked at a piece of abstract art? I have to admit, I can look at this kind of art for hours and not see a single thing. I’m terrible at gleaning some sort of meaning or detail out of the abstract. My mind doesn’t work that way. Some people can look at abstract art and see something beautiful, specific to them as the interpreter of the art piece, a beauty that they themselves only see. I, on the other hand, see a bunch of colors splattered on a canvas. It looks like a mess, not art. I want to see art in the form of something I know and can relate to. When I see a painting of a landscape I can appreciate it more because it’s specific and concrete, I can put myself there, I can see it in my mind’s eye. I know its boundaries because visually, in my mind, I can touch them.

It’s the same with the Holy Cross. Today, I can point to it. There it is. No, that’s not the cross that Jesus died on, but I can imagine what took place when I look at the cross. I know what He did on it and I know specifically what that death meant for me. It meant that I’m forgiven because He died in my place – on a cross – on a specific day – on a specific hill – alongside specific people. He was

buried in a specific tomb. He rose on the third day – a specific/concrete day. He appeared to eyewitnesses. They saw Him. They could touch Him and some of them did. I love the Gospel of Jesus because it is tangible. And for us, today, it's right here in His Word – in these words – You are forgiven in the name of Jesus. That's the Gospel.

But the cross goes out of focus for us – it becomes abstract, when it becomes a cross that we have to carry today. No, I don't mean your troubles are abstract. You know the burdens you must shoulder, you know how heavy they are because they weigh in your heart. You can name them. But what becomes difficult is when we try to imagine how they become ours. How did I deserve this disease or the sin of someone else that has been placed upon me? How did all of this misfortune in life fall on my plate? Why, Lord? Why did it happen? And the cross we carry starts to become less and less clear. We hate that.

There are times we can answer that question of how and why the cross became less clear, heavy, and even unbearable. Our sins made it that way. Our choices of self over family. The cross, our cross, gets heavier each day, when we let our sins fester without repentance... when we choose the world over our Lord... when we think that the clearer way, less abstract way, and the easier way to get rid of the crosses that burden us is to seek happiness created somehow by us – no matter how we build that road or who we step on along the way, or if we decide that what is most important is no longer our priority.

Beloved, our worries come in different ways and our troubles are sometimes difficult to understand. Each day we worry about our kids and what we are going to do. Each day we worry about what medicines we need to take, or if the next doctor's visit will yield a good report – one that I can understand and is not abstract. Each day we worry about our world – the world our kids and grandkids will grow up in. We worry about the troubles they will face because it seems like things are getting worse out there – being a Christian with a standard of truth is becoming less and less the norm – and the moral fabric of our society erodes more and more. These are specific things, but they are hard for us to understand as in the midst of it all, we carry the cross.

But, beloved in the Lord, while these worries are heavy, not clear, many in number, don't forget, our Lord Jesus carried the one cross that matters the most all the way to that one hill, with one objective in mind – your life and strength to take on your enormous crosses. Our one specific Jesus, at times with pain and suffering in our minds – at times with “Lift High the Cross” on our lips went to the one cross – with suffering for the sake of victory as the goal. So, when we look at the cross, the Holy Cross we can know what happened and never doubt. We can sing with tears about the cross and we can sing with triumphant accord about the same cross in one magnificent breath. It's the same cross and there is no doubt. Jesus can suffer on it and win victory for you on that same cross on the same day – at the very same moment. This is the “concreteness” of the Gospel. It's concrete at the altar, at that font and in these words. Beloved, you have it.

The symbol of our faith can both confound us and be as clear as day. That also seems to be indicative of life. However, in the midst of our tears when looking at it, or joy when Jesus is glorified by it, we can be confident, the goal was accomplished for you. The victory is won. That part is not a mystery. Be confident, beloved in the Lord, that part is for you. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.