

Holy Cross Day 2008

“We should glory in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, for he is our salvation, our life and our resurrection: through him we are saved and made free.” *Introit for the Feast of the Triumph of the Cross.*”

Leytonstone, in East London, gave the world some important people. Alfred Hitchcock was one. Two England captains, Graham Gooch and David Beckham, are others, but close as those three are to my heart, they must all cede in the Groves hierarchy to my own father, born and brought up there before the war. Round about 1932, he took part in the Sunday School nativity play at St Andrew’s Leytonstone. His was a rather surprising role. Anticipating the future ministry of Jesus, the script held a part for a young boy called Bartimaeus – the youthful version of a man Jesus would later heal of his blindness. My father’s job was to grope his way into the stable, explain that he was blind, and ask someone to guide his hand so that he could present the child Jesus with his gift. That gift was a cross. What a present to bring a baby – a gallows.

The cross, for us, is sanitised. It needs to be, for we cannot bear it. More on that later, but for now reflect that the symbol which has become a staple of art and architecture, of gold and silver and all sorts of jewellery is, in fact, a gallows. An object and instrument of execution. Would you wear a small noose around your neck? Probably not.

We need to appreciate the horror of the cross before we can appreciate its triumph. This is the fundamental import of what is often called the theology of the cross, first promulgated by Paul. The Christian message makes no sense, fulfils no preconceived expectations, satisfies no earthly demands: Jews look for signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a scandal to Jews and folly to the Greeks. The foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men. The evangelists take up this topsy-turvey theme with extraordinary power in their narratives. St Mark and St John in particular identify the almost ludicrous paradox whereby the glory of Christ – the visible sign of his power and status – is nothing other than the instrument of his agony and death, the gallows of a common criminal, so that the cross from which the Saviour hangs is also the throne of glory from which he reigns.

The Feast we celebrate today is an event in the church’s calendar which allows us to focus on Christ’s passion and victory by focusing on the cross itself. It is a combination of ancient devotions, incorporating themes from the celebration of the legend whereby the so-called true cross was presented to the empress Helena, Constantine’s mother, a celebration formerly kept on a different date. It also originates in part in the military triumph whereby the true cross was recovered by the

Christian emperor from the Persians, and exalted as a symbol of victory. Perhaps we are familiar from our history lessons with the story of Constantine receiving a vision of the cross and being told, In this sign conquer, before he defeated Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge to become emperor. We might know that the Latin word for cross has given us the unfortunate word “crusade”, as if the cross were a sign for inflicting violence rather than enduring it. The reason for this symbolism is, of course, that the cross is the sign of Christian identity, but the victory of the cross with which the gospels are concerned is far removed from the context of conflict and aggression with which it was later associated. The cross is something which is borne by Jesus, something he accepts and endures in suffering, and only then something which he gives to the world as the sign of its salvation.

The visual image of the cross fits well with its double purpose. Two contrasting lines or directions – something pointing one way, another thing pointing a different way – come together to make what we call a cross. Artists and poets have not been slow to reap the harvest of this imaginative potential. Both John Donne and George Herbert wrote poems called The Cross (in Donne’s case, as a defence of the use of the sign in the rite of baptism) which weave a sophisticated patterns of visual and spiritual crosses, reminding the reader that crossing oneself with conscience and self examination will reveal two contrary things –

the way we are, the way we should be – but also observing that human pride is once and for all crossed with the selfless love of Christ creating yet another cross – what we should be according to our sin, and what we are according to our justification. The paradox of Christian identity – at once righteous and a sinner as Luther famously has it – is then paralleled in the visual symbol of that identity. For that reason the sign of the cross which we make with our hands remains essential – if you want to learn it, it’s very easy: up, down, left, right; or right left, in Eastern Christianity – it’s a simple, physical expression of the Christian faith which, you may never have noticed, is doubly a symbol of selfless love: it is a symbol of Christ, but it is also formed by making an I, and then crossing it out.

Earlier I said that for us the cross is sanitised, because we cannot bear it. We cannot. It is Jesus who can and does bear the cross. He bears it because he carries it to Golgotha and the place of his death. He bears it because he endures the inconceivable pain and suffering which comes with gradually breathing out ones life, as the chest becomes ever heavier and the lungs ever shallower. But he bears is also because he gives birth to the cross, he brings something new to the world and to the church by his acceptance of the cross, he makes the instrument of execution, the gallows, the gibbet, into the sign of love’s ultimate victory. Medieval devotion to the wood of the true cross was not simply a superstitious

belief in the power of particular physical objects, in fact, I'm not sure it was ever quite so crude. The Christianity of previous centuries understood far better than we do that the whole of creation is the instrument of God's purposes and that not just people, but everything which exists, is transformed by Christ. It was a Calvinist, George Herbert, who wrote the lines "The crosse taught all wood to resound his name, Who bore the same." Remember, next time you use the phrase "touch wood", why you are saying it. The stuff of earth, the stuff of death, is transformed by Christ into the instrument of heaven and the elixir of life.

Faithful cross above all other,
One and only noble tree,
None in foliage, none in blossom,
None in fruit thy peer may be.
Sweetest wood and sweetest iron,
Sweetest weight is hung on thee.

The magnificent hymn which we call the Crux Fidelis, which we shall sing at the offertory, summarises this double aspect, the transformation from death to life, and all its topsy turvey implications: this ugly piece of wood and iron is sweeter than all the flower and leaf and fruit of the trees in all creation. These harsh and hard things are made beautiful by the weight which screams down upon them, ripping through flesh and muscle, tearing at limbs and gasping out life. Christ as a victim, is the

victor, and just as humanity fell by succumbing to the tempting delights of a tree, so it is raised beyond its former status by another tree, the tree of glory, which becomes not the rack of violence and torture but the gentlest throne of all:

Bend thy boughs O Tree of Glory,
Thy too rigid sinews bend,
For while the ancient rigour
That thy birth bestowed suspend,
And the King of heavenly beauty,
On thy bosom gently tend.

"We should glory in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, for he is our salvation, our life and our resurrection: through him we are saved and made free."