

Holy Cross Day

14 9 14

Almighty God,
who in the passion of your blessed Son
made an instrument of painful death
to be for us the means of life and peace:
grant us so to glory in the cross of Christ
that we may gladly suffer for his sake

Our text this morning may be found in today's gospel and is part of John 3 v 14:

‘ . . . so must the Son of Man be lifted up . . . ’

14th September falls on a Sunday this year. In our Christian calendar, 14th September is Holy Cross Day. In the Book of Common Prayer, it could also be referred to as the Exultation of the Holy Cross. In Anglo-Saxon England, it was referred to as Roodmass-day – Rood, here spelt r-o-o-d, being the Old English word for cross. At university, I once studied the Old English poem, ‘The Dream of the Rood’ in which the cross of Christ remembers what happened on Good Friday. In some mediaeval churches, there might be a rood screen between the high altar and the nave – for example, the one at St Giles, South Mymms, near the M25 service station, has an open wooden arch surmounted by Jesus on the cross with the Blessed Virgin and the Beloved Disciple on either side of him. In Rome, Jews were compelled to attend church on this day to hear the sermon, a custom in force until its abolition by Pope Gregory XV I around 1840.

Today, then when we honour the cross of Christ, let us reflect briefly on this Roman instrument of execution that has come to be for us a symbol of salvation.

Let me say that I don't want to dwell on the mechanics of this particularly painful and nasty means of Roman capital punishment. Suffice it to say, it was not a nice way to die and anything but quick. Instead, let's look for a moment at the idea of being lifted up and the shape of the cross itself.

Lifted up can mean being able to see or be seen. Certainly, one year when he was smaller and lighter, I lifted up my godson, Edward, to see the Dinard fireworks over the heads of the folk crowding the Dinard promenade. But on the cross, Jesus could not only see those who surrounded him, the soldiers, those who mocked him, John and the group of faithful women, but he was also high enough in the air to be easily seen by them. So in one sense, the cross raises Jesus up physically. But in a more importance sense, the height in the air symbolises who and what he is. In the Incarnation, he descended from heaven – as Paul writes in Philippians, humbling himself, setting aside his glory to be a servant and to die for us. Then, he was raised from the dead and ascended into heaven where he is enthroned in glory. And in one sense, being on the cross is the glorification of Christ in that it symbolises and embodies God's love for us in terms what he is prepared to do to reach out to us.

The cross has something of the letter T about it – two straight lines intersecting. It could almost be a glyph for a man, head and body straight, legs together, arms outstretched. It is one of the signs that we are Christians and some folk like to

wear a cross around their neck and outside their clothes as a sign that they are Christian. Mine is round my neck, hidden under my shirt. But one of the ways I love to think of the cross is as a bridge between God and Man. Crossing over what separates Man from God, the cross is an effective bridge between us and God, one way that he is reaching out to us and by which we can effectively come over to him.

So today, when we are remembering the cross and rejoicing in Jesus' triumph and glory thereon, it is worth reflecting that what was an effective form of Roman capital punishment has become an effective form and expression of our salvation. And lastly, implicit in the cross, is the sobering fact that the suffering and pain that we all can and do experience in this life may be a means of achieving God's purpose for ourselves and for those for whom we work.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

14th September, 2014

G: Sermons 30 : Holy Cross Day

