

The Wisdom of the Cross

3^d Sunday in Lent, Year B. March 15, 2009. (Text: 1 Cor. 1:18-25)

Anywhere you go in the world, the cross is the symbol of Christianity. Atop the great lantern at the summit of the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, there's a beautiful golden cross. On the side of a little, plain teakwood hall in the Thai hilltop village called Mae Salit Kee which we used to visit, near the Burma border, there's a simple painted cross. On the stone façade of our new building here in Aspen there will be a tall, back-lit cross.

More than a year ago, when the church was still in the planning stage, I heard this over and over: "The new church is going to have a cross on it, isn't it?" Wherever in the world you are, if you see a cross you say, "that's a church." The cross is the symbol of the church, of the Christian religion.

But there's a problem with a symbol that becomes so familiar. It can easily become nothing more than a marker... something like the familiar Interstate Highway sign.

It can even become just a piece of jewelry. In this post-Christian era, you see people wearing crosses around their necks, or strung on charm bracelets along with miniature tennis rackets, four-leaf clovers and their children's birthstones. Such wearers are people for whom the cross is no longer even a marker. It's just a casual item of personal adornment. In one of his videos for the Alpha Course, Nicky Gumbel told about two young London women whom he overheard talking in a shop. They were looking at jewelry, and one of them said to the other something like, "Oh, look at the different crosses. Aren't they lovely?" And her friend said, "Oh, yes. The gold one with the ruby is very pretty. And look at that one! It has a little *man* on it."

"It has a little man on it." *Jesus*.

During the season of Lent, it's a tradition in the Episcopal Church that we put a purple veil over the cross, as you see here. For years I have been telling people that the veil is there to remind us that sin creates a separation between ourselves and the Lord, and Lent is a time to turn from our sin so we can draw close to Christ. But I am beginning to think that I should start saying something different. I should say that the veil is put there as a sign that we don't yet understand the meaning of the cross. The meaning of the cross and the power of the cross are veiled to us, obscure to us, until we have been raised to a new life in Christ.

In the Episcopal marriage rite, the most solemn moment comes at the very end, after the bride and groom have exchanged their vows and rings and have been pronounced husband and wife. The very last thing in the ceremony is the Blessing of the Marriage. The couple kneel in front of the priest, and the priest pronounces over them a blessing which begins with these words: "*Most gracious God, we give you thanks for your tender love in sending Jesus Christ to come among us, to be born of a human mother, and to make the way of the cross to be the way of life.*"

Jesus made the way of the cross to be the Way of Life. (Capital "W," capital "L.")

We Christians have crosses over the altars in our churches, and in stained glass windows, and on the top of steeples. We wear them around our necks or on our lapels. We stamp them on the covers of Bibles and prayer books and hymnals. Roman Catholic churches and some Episcopal and Lutheran churches have a large crucifix over the altar – a cross with the body of Christ fixed to it, a reminder that the cross is more than just an abstract symbol. It was an instrument of real suffering and real death — a humiliating death, a public embarrassment.

Holy Week is coming in three weeks, and during Holy Week many of us will spend time meditating on the Way of the Cross. We will look at Christ on the cross and ponder the mystery of it. But what is most important is the thing we're least likely to do.

When Holy Week comes there's a tendency among church people to let ourselves be absorbed in sentimental emotion about Jesus' physical suffering. A great deal of Christian art and hymnody does that: "*Ah, holy Jesus, how hast thou offended, that man to scorn thee hath in hate pretended? By foes derided, by thine own rejected, O, most afflicted!*" I can understand such emotions, and I feel them too when Good Friday comes around, because what the Son of God experienced for us was truly bitter, painful, and awful. He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, "*Father, please let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, let not what I want, but what you want be done.*" He went to the cross out of obedience, but also out of love. His love for us put him there.

But there is spiritual danger in sentimentalizing the cross and the suffering of Jesus. Because such sentimental emotion holds the suffering Savior "out *there*," separate from us, detached from us – unattainably holy and distant – to be adored from afar. We are here on our knees, and Christ is "up there" on his cross. But what God wants is for us to put our knowledge of the crucified Lord deep in our own souls, fused with our own identity, and let it motivate our orientation to the world. God wants us to claim Jesus' cross for ourselves, to make the way of the cross our *own* Way of Life. Jesus said, "Take up your own cross and follow me."

Jesus of Nazareth started walking the way of the cross a long time before his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, a long time before his life was actually on the line in the Roman governor's courtroom. He started walking the way of the cross when he aggravated everybody by running the money changers and animal sellers out of the Temple and accusing the priests of turning God's House into a marketplace. (What a dangerous, foolish gesture. They were probably all back doing business as usual the next day!) Jesus was walking the way of the cross when he irritated the fraternity of Pharisees by telling a paralyzed man that his sins were forgiven, then proving it by saying, "rise, take up your bed and go home." In addition, he did all this on the Sabbath day, when carrying a sleeping mat was not permitted.

When Jesus did such things, he put to death any possible future for himself as a respectable rabbi. He was too unconventional, too outspoken, and clearly too threatening to the religious establishment. Saying "*Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up,*" did not earn him the respect of the High Priest . . . it made him a marked man. —How ready are we to be "marked" men and women?

To Christians in Corinth who had a high opinion of their own sophistication (like many of us here in Aspen), Paul wrote "*The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*" Letting himself be crucified was not a strategy for success in the eyes of the general public. It was a foolish mistake. It made him a messianic failure. Even his friends thought that —*until* Easter evening when he came to them in the Upper Room and showed them his nail-scarred hands and wounded side.

"*The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*" Notice the verbs. The message of the cross sounds like foolishness to good, law-abiding religious people who "are perishing." But it sounds like "the power of God" to us sinners who "are being saved."

We're all "on the way." We're in process – as we have been for some time. Either spiritual decay has already set in and we're "perishing" or redemptive transformation has begun, and we're "being saved." But in either case, God isn't finished with us yet. There is still hope for the dying, and there are potential pitfalls ahead for the rest of us. In "fear and trembling," as Paul was to say a few years later, "we must work out our own salvation" —the movement from brokenness to wholeness and from double-mindedness to purity of heart — which is the process of being saved: becoming *like Christ*.

If you and I want to follow the Master, we must be willing to appear foolish in the eyes of the religious *and* the secular intelligentsia, the crowd, and even our old friends. To plant the cross deep in our own souls, to recognize that the cross is not just his, but ours too, may make us fools for Christ's sake. —Very well. So be it.

"Most gracious God, we give you thanks for your tender love in sending Jesus Christ to come among us, to be born of a human mother, and to make the way of the cross to be the Way of Life."