

## Sermon: Holy Cross Day 2008 at St Mary, Bourne Street

Thank you for inviting me to this great Mass in honour of the Holy Cross and for asking me to preach. I have two rather negligible qualifications for this task. For Fifteen years I was Vicar of St Helen's Church, Bilton, in Yorkshire – a church dedicated to the woman who discovered the original Cross in Jerusalem in AD 326. Helen found the Cross on the site of what was to become the Church of the Holy Sepulchre – called the *anastasis*, the Resurrection – and now I am Priest-in-Charge of St Sepulchre's Church here in London.

Because the Cross is rightly the most important image in the Christian faith, we may find that its familiarity blinds us to the recognition of just what a shocking image it is. It is an instrument of torture. Imagine – the guillotine or the thumbscrews taking central position in all our churches. G.K. Chesterton preferred the Crucifix because it directly draws our attention to the Saviour rather than the means of his execution.

There is something shocking also in the very name of this Feast Day: *Holy Cross*. For crucifixion was the extreme mark of curse and shame – the very opposite of holiness. But the word *holy* has a much older derivation according to which it means *strange* or *awesome*. And the Cross is certainly that.

There are churches where the Cross is nowhere to be seen: places where the prohibition on the making of images is taken too literally and therefore misconstrued. But there is a surmounting reason for images. Since the Incarnation, the faith is embodied. And we have images as we have Sacraments. God chooses to reveal himself in *things*. All images have something of the icon about them in that they are not merely symbols but they embody the meaning which they present.

When we wish to approach as closely as we can, or as we dare, to the mysteries of God, we not only *say* something but we *do* something. The doing necessarily involves objects and these objects are the essence of our actions: water at baptism; the ring at the marriage; the Bread and Wine of the Eucharist. Images and Sacraments are at the centre of all divine revelation. This is because an image can do what words cannot do very well: images can express complexities within a single unity and opposites directly. And we need them to do this – for religious truth is paradoxical.

Explanations, even what I'm telling you now, can only take us part of the way. I'm sorry to say I once upset a modern theologian by telling him that when anyone tried to explain religion to me I wanted to be sick. But the image, under the constant gaze of meditation, reveals to us the paradoxical depths of our faith. So the Bread and Wine, the Body and Blood, are signs of death; but in the Sacrifice of the Mass they are life itself. And Our Lord's Cross made him accursed, but by it we are blest.

Let me encourage you then to come into church quietly by yourself and kneel before the Cross. When you contemplate the Cross you don't just see it: you enter into the very process of your redemption in a way that is deeper than words of devotion, in a way that bypasses and surpasses words of any sort.

Christ died to save the world. And so the imprint of his Cross is found everywhere in the world to remind us and reassure us. As John Donne exclaimed ecstatically:

*Who can deny me power and liberty  
To stretch mine arms and mine own Cross to be?  
Swim, and at every stroke thou art thy Cross;  
The mast and yard make one where seas do toss;  
Look down thou spiest out crosses in small things;  
Look up, thou seest birds raised on crossed wings;  
All the globe's frame and spheres is nothing else,  
But the meridians crossing parallels.*

Contemplate the Cross then and know what Our Lord did there. What he did and suffered for you. Paradoxes and ironies are at the centre of the Crucifixion. The carpenter is nailed to the wood. God who made the world is murdered by means of the material of his creation. And the worst suffering was not the nails. Urs von Balthasar tells it straight:

*The real essence of Christ's passion consisted in the two things we least like to bear and suffer: fear and disgrace.*

By his disgrace, Grace to us is made palpable. And his agony and disgrace was very prolonged. Lancelot Andrewes makes us understand:

*He must die by inchmeal – not swallow his death at once, but taste it.*

The paradoxes persist. The Cross is the supreme sign of God's love for us. And it is also a weapon of war. We have been know to sing: *with the Cross of Jesus going on before.*

The Cross, which saves us from hell, itself went to hell on Holy Saturday. This is called the *Harrowing of Hell*. And *harrowing* is derived from the military terminology which means *to make predatory raids and incursions*. But our Christ made more than a guerrilla attack: he took his Cross and planted it in the middle of the kingdom of evil. In an apocryphal gospel – and apocryphal gospels are marvellous, again as Chesterton said, *I love my religion and I especially love those parts of it which heathens regard as superstitious* – in an apocryphal gospel it says:

*And the Lord set his Cross in the midst of hell, which is the sign of victory. And Adam was there and he cast himself at the Lord's feet, then rose up and kissed his pierced hands and shed abundant tears, saying, 'Behold the hands that formed me!' And he said unto the Lord, 'Thou art come O King of Glory, to set men free and gather them to thine everlasting Kingdom.' Then our mother Eve also in like manner cast herself at the feet of the Lord and rose up and kissed his pierced hands and shed tears abundantly and said, 'Behold the hands which fashioned me; testifying unto all.'*

The gates of hell are the portals of death. Our Saviour, carrying his Cross, storms the gates of hell and delivers us from the power of sin and death. Hell is harrowed and the Devil is cowed. Christ has plumbed the depths, entered hell, as Balthasar says *with a thud* that resonates through all time and eternity. He has done this for us men and for our salvation. That is why his Holy Cross Day is a Feast.

*Lift up your heads O ye gates, and be ye lift up ye everlasting doors and the King of Glory shall come in. Who is the King of Glory? Even the Lord of Hosts, he is the King of Glory*