

Exaltation of the Holy Cross

Numbers 21:4-9

Phil 2:6-11

John 3:13-17

In the Christian calendar there are many feasts of the Cross, all of which commemorate the cross used to crucify Jesus. Unlike Good Friday, which is dedicated to the Passion of Jesus, today's feast celebrates three events.

Firstly, the finding of the true cross in Jerusalem by St Helena in 326 AD. Secondly, the dedication of the Church of the Most Holy Sepulchre built on the site of that discovery, and the dedication of the church on Mount Calvary. Thirdly, the repossession of the cross in 629 AD after it had fallen into the hands of the Persians when Jerusalem was conquered in 614 AD.

But why do we venerate one of the most brutal instruments of torture used to destroy human life? The answer is found in today's readings.

In the gospel reading, Jesus asks Nicodemus to recall the occasion in the wilderness when due to the sinfulness of Israel, God sent fiery serpents among the people who died from their bite. Once the people had repented, Moses was instructed to make a bronze image of the serpent and place it on a pole. Anyone who looked at this image after they had been bitten, would live. Looking at the image of death was the means of saving their life.

Jesus then points out to Nicodemus that He has come down from heaven not to extend our physical lives but to enable us to live eternal life in the here and now as well as in life beyond the grave. Those who gaze upon the crucified Lord lifted up on the Cross as Moses lifted up the serpent, and respond to His love positively, will be saved.

In the story of Jesus' Passion, two trees are significant. They are the fig tree which Jesus curses on His way into Jerusalem (Mt 21:18-22), and the olive tree. In the Garden of Eden, the eating of the fruit of the fig tree, which Jews consider to be the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, by Adam and Eve, caused humanity to be distanced from God. On the night before He died Jesus prayed in Gethsemane, an olive grove, trees that Jews consider to be the tree of life (Mk 14:32-42).

The Book of Deuteronomy (21:23), states that everyone who is hanged on a tree is accursed of God. Yet Christians see the Cross of Christ, described as a tree, very differently. As a hymn says:

*"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."*

On His last journey to Calvary Jesus brought a third tree, a tree of victory over evil and reconciliation to God, which stood between those on which the two cursed thieves were hanging. One thief harangued Jesus, thinking only of himself and what Jesus could do for him (Lk 23:39). The other, concerned about the suffering that Jesus did not deserve, was told he would be with Jesus in paradise (Lk 23:43). On the cross, Jesus' arms stretch out to grasp self-centred evil on one side and compassionate concern on the other. Through Jesus' self-offering on the third tree, the curse of evil and death are destroyed; life and freedom are restored. We can only move from self-centredness to new life via the Cross of Jesus.

This is what makes Christianity different to other religious beliefs. It is not an abstract or purely spiritual religion. It is incarnational, it speaks of God's direct intervention in the affairs of this world and people in it. At its centre is a real event, involving real people, including a real brutal crucifixion on a real cross. Take away the cross and the reality of suffering and what we are left with is humanism wrapped in religious cellophane paper. It may look attractive, but it will not save us. It is our responding positively to the sacrifice of the Son of God lifted up on the Cross, the instrument of death, that will lead to our resurrection and new life. Nothing else will.

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