

Holy Cross

Today we celebrate Holy Cross Day.

You may have noticed that wearing a cross has become something of a fashion statement these days. Large, diamond encrusted or gold plated crosses adorn the outfits of many of today's celebrities and sports stars. I don't know about you, but I find it highly offensive to take the most sacred of Christian symbols and trivialize it as a showy piece of expensive jewellery. It seems to me that this fashion trend is rather indicative of the society and culture in which we find ourselves in modern day North America; a place of increasing self centeredness and self focus, where the cost of what I wear, defines who I am--for it is how much of the world values me.

Whether it is the clothes on our backs, the cars which we drive, or even the houses which we can afford, so many of these things intended to keep us warm, get us around, and shelter us from the cold, have become glaring status symbols, in a culture which values them so much. But the question begs to be asked, can the cross really be a symbol of individualistic expression, or a symbol of status for all to see?

The cross is most certainly the central symbol of the Christian faith; recognized almost anywhere in the world. Its recognition *can* spawn negativity for some, and offer redemption for others, but like it or not, this first century tool, of human destruction, is clearly the most identifiable representation of our faith.

I once knew a teenager in another parish who liked to ask me questions which he thought I couldn't answer. One day he asked me if the cross I wore around my neck was the same thing as someone who might wear an electric chair in its place. However smugly, he essentially was asking me why I would hang, an instrument of death, around my neck.

Early Christians didn't have the symbol of the cross in such a prominent place as we do. In their day we would have seen more fish than crosses. Seeing crosses as often and in as many places as we do anesthetizes us to the horror in front of us. We too easily forget the plain meaning of the cross is brutal and horrific.

We no longer use crucifixion as a means of killing those we wish, in the name of justice, to kill. If Jesus had been executed sixty or seventy years ago in Canada we might be looking at the hangman's noose above our altar. If he had been executed in revolutionary France, we would be looking at guillotines. Or if Jesus were executed today in the one of the American states that still uses capital punishment we might have a gas chamber or an electric chair or a lethal injection syringe.

If we try to imagine any of those symbols above and behind this altar, perhaps we get a glimpse of how the cross spoke to those early Christians. It is traumatic and discomforting.

In exalting the cross, we are taking something that is brutal, painful, deadly... and resurrecting it in a most hopeful and life giving way... Of course, we don't do that... God does that.

Too often, however, we don't see the true horror of the cross as a cruel human tool. The cross in human hands, our hands, is an abomination. Only through God's redeeming love can it show love.

We need to look back in honesty. The story of the cross is the story of redemption being possible for the most evil of things. We lose a great deal if we let the true depth of that evil slide out of the picture. We need to remember that far too often we are no different than the crowds who called for Jesus to be nailed to the cross... no different than the public servants who dutifully executed the task.

Jesus calls us to take up our cross and follow. But I have the sense that, starting perhaps with Emperor Constantine and continuing to my own life, too often we take up the cross and lead rather than follow. Hymns like "Lift High the Cross", which we sang today and which is among my favourites, enhance this danger. They make us feel very good about raising up the cross, and along with that comfortable, good feeling, comes the temptation to carry the cross in directions that feel good and comfortable to us... But Jesus does not lead us in feel-good, comfortable ways.

It is very easy, as humans, to beguile ourselves into thinking the cross is leading us exactly where we wanted to go in the first place... It is quite convenient and it is quite sinful.

When members of the Ku Klux Klan, in our fairly recent history, burned crosses as a weapon of racial hatred and terror, they were following their own desires. They were not following the Cross of Jesus. When Crusaders in the Middle Ages took up the cross as they blundered and

pillaged in their efforts to reclaim the Holy Land, they were not following the Cross of Jesus.

We can say with confidence that mass murderers and terrorists who convince themselves that they are doing God's will when they blow up nightclubs frequented by the LGBTQ community or abortion clinics, are not following the Cross of Jesus.

We could develop a never ending list of times when we, human beings, Christians, have taken up our cross and gone exactly where we wanted to go, not following Jesus, but following our own hearts and desires. But the only list that is important for me is the list of when I have forced the cross to take me where I want to go rather than where Jesus leads.

That is half the story. It must be faced. We dishonor this day if we do not bring to mind our failures and our frailty, if we do not confess and humbly repent, for the times when we have not truly followed Jesus but taken up the Cross to satisfy our own needs and agendas.

But, thank God, this is not the whole story. The other half of the story is the endless list of times when people did take up their cross and follow... often at great personal cost... even to the point of death. Martin Luther King springs to mind. And Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Oskar Schindler and Oscar Romero.

We could develop a list that never ends when we, human beings, Christians, have taken up our cross in humility and faithfully followed without regard to cost or comfort as they strove to contribute to the building of His kingdom—a kingdom of love, mercy and compassion, forgiveness, peace and justice. And in honest humility I have to be prepared to make my own list

of when I have been a faithful follower. Not to do so dishonours the day.

The power of the cross is simply this: that God so loved the world, the He gave his only begotten son so that we might be redeemed and have eternal life. It is through Christ's offering on the cross that something so loathsome and so detestable can be transformed by God into something so wonderful, that an instrument of death can become a sign of resurrection.

That is the transformation that we need, that I need in my heart – that I can die to this world and be resurrected to God's Kingdom – not as some far off, fantastic, future thing, but here and now because through God and through the Cross this is possible.