

TRANSCRIPT OF A HOMILY PREACHED BY FR. JOHN GAYFORD AT ST. MARY'S EAST GRINSTEAD ON THE FEAST OF THE TRIUMPH OF THE CROSS ON 14TH SEPTEMBER 2008.

GOSPEL

A reading from the holy Gospel according to John 3:13-17

The Son of Man must be lifted up.

Jesus said to Nicodemus:

'No one has gone up to heaven
except the one who came down from heaven,
the Son of Man who is in heaven;
and the Son of Man must be lifted up
as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert,
so that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.
Yes, God loved the world so much
that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost
but may have eternal life.
For God sent his Son into the world
not to condemn the world,
but so that through him the world might be saved.'

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

Introduction

The essence of our faith in our Lord Jesus Christ is that he is the eternal Word of God who became incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth, who lived, preached and worked miracles; but suffered on the cross, was raised from the dead and became the Lord of heaven and earth. This we profess in our creeds and it is said in a synoptic form in today's Gospel. We claim that it was through the Cross that we have a chance of winning salvation. Thus the sign of the Cross is a sign of faith in our Lord.

Yet the death of Jesus became the most difficult thing to interpret.

How could God allow it to happen? What did it mean?

These were the questions with which early preachers struggled, and their successors have struggled since.

There is a need to go beyond the historical fact and the social and political reasons why it happened. The theology of the Cross has developed over the centuries leading to profound insight into salvation. The death of Jesus was not only a *salvation* event but also a *revelatory* event.

Today's celebration is called The Triumph of the Holy Cross [*In exultatione Sanctae Crucis*]. All four Gospels deal with the Cross in different ways.

St. Matthew stresses the obedience of Jesus to God, and by his death on the cross anticipates the Kingdom of God. At the Last Supper Jesus is reported as saying:

I tell you I will never drink this fruit of the vine until the day when I drink it new with you in my Father's Kingdom. [St. Matthew 26: 29.]

Matthew went on to ask the community which lived after him to live spiritually with Jesus in the light of God's Kingdom by loving one another as Jesus had loved them.

St. Mark projects the disciples as slow to realise who Jesus is. Remember in Mark's Gospel Peter acknowledges Jesus as the Messiah, but goes no further. The full revelation is left to the centurion at the foot of the Cross:

Truly this man was the son of God [15:39]; but the cross looms in his Gospel:
If anyone wants to become my follower, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. [St Mark 8: 34].

St. Luke interprets the Cross as a *daily* personal event:

If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. [St. Luke 9:23].

Luke identified the Passion of Christ with the suffering servant of Isaiah. The emphasis is that salvation is through the Cross. He says at the end of his Gospel:

The Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in His name to all nations [St. Luke 24:46]

St. John spiritualises the Cross more than the synoptic Gospels. He identifies the crucifixion of Jesus with his exaltation. He sees Jesus as the Son of God coming from heaven to dwell with humans, but returning to heaven *through* the Cross. Thus he answers the scandal of the cross by regarding it as a lifting up or exaltation:

When I am lifted up from the earth I will draw all people to myself [St. John 12:32].

Today's Gospel makes it clear that it is through the Cross we are saved.

St. Paul had a problem as a Jew: according to the Old Testament a false Messiah was to be put to death and a true Messiah would not die. So if Jesus was the Messiah he would not die; and because he died he was a false Messiah and according to Deuteronomy 21:23 he was cursed by his death on a tree.

It is clear St. Paul meditated a lot on the Cross and it appears extensively in his writings. He wrestles with the Old Testament texts. He came to the conclusion that because God raised Jesus from the dead he confounded human judgement and reason. He admits: *For Jews demand a sign and the Greeks wisdom. We proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jew, and foolishness to Gentiles* (by this he meant the Greeks). [I Corinthians 1: 22+23]. Then he continues:

For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

To the Hellenist or Greek the death of Jesus was unimpressive. He gave no great speech nor took the dignity of suicide. There was only the cry from the Cross:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me.

He did not show his power and escape. Thus the cross was foolishness and weakness and to them divine powers did not act like that.

Again and again St. Paul says that Jesus died for our sins [I Cor. 15: 3; Romans 4: 25; and 8:34; I Timothy 2:6]. Like St. Mark, Paul saw that the Cross was the will of God and was necessary. The suffering of the righteous one was predicted in Isaiah, Psalms and Wisdom.

The early Church. To many of the early Church writers the way to follow Christ to heaven was to die as a martyr for the faith. Later this was to include dying to the flesh and taking up the ascetic life in monastic existence.

The Gnostics did not see how divinity could be crucified, and thought divinity entered Jesus at his baptism and left him before the crucifixion. Alternatively a substitute took his place and was crucified ? Simon of Cyrene.

St. Augustine describes the event of the Cross as a battle between good and evil. Jesus acted as a bait in a trap for the Devil – who thought that if he could kill the Son of God on the cross he would have won his final battle over humanity. In losing this battle at the Resurrection, he lost his right to all human souls.

Constantine the first Christian Roman Emperor took the Cross as a battle sign to find its place on shields and battle banners. Church architecture and art in his time and since took the cross in many shapes and forms. Hymns were written in reverence of the Cross and over many years formed some of the jewels in Hymnals.

Some of the reformers later (notably not Luther) thought too much was made of the cross and went as far as to remove the image of our Lord from it, leaving bare the wood of the cross.

St. Ignatius Loyola in his spiritual exercises encourages the imagining of Christ on his Cross and asks us to have a dialogue with him. This might often be done in front of a crucifix. Those of you familiar with the stories of Don Camillo will know how frequent this dialogue became for him.

Modern Times have seen in some degree a rebellion against the Cross. It may be seen by liberation theologians and to some degree by feminist theologians as an exemplar for repression and violence, and they would rather focus on the teachings of Jesus alone.

Conclusions. Nevertheless the Cross stands as the most solemn sacred symbol of the Christian faith. It represents the absolute sacrifice made by Jesus. He died the death of a common criminal to grant his followers the opportunity of gaining salvation. It is not the purpose of this Day to go into the detail of what happened.

The sign of the Cross is a sign of hope in God to rule the world with righteousness. The Cross confounded the ancient Jews and Greeks as it has continued to do to all throughout history. For us it confounds the idea that we can seek God in comfort: salvation means sacrifice. St. Thomas a Kempis (early 15th. C) says at the beginning of his work *The Imitation of Christ: Jesus has many who love his kingdom in heaven, but few who bear his cross.*

In the cross we see the solidarity of Jesus with the human condition, even to death, death on a cross. This reveals God is with us and reveals the extent of the love of God.

God knows the pain of love. Thus the cross becomes the supreme symbol of God's love.