

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Robert R. Hansel for Holy Cross Day on the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 12, 2010 at The Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

Getting CROSS-ways

This coming Tuesday—September 14—is a red letter Holy Day. That means it's an occasion which the Church designates as a celebration that is to be "regularly observed, taking precedence over all other days of commemoration or of special observance." For most of us I doubt that, for all the importance the Prayer book seems to attach to it, it's one that looms large on our mental radar. I suspect that you probably wouldn't even know what next Tuesday's special day is if it weren't for the fact that our Chapel typically moves such observances to the nearest Sunday. Holy Cross Day would probably have come and gone, unobserved and unnoticed.

Holy Cross Day is actually an unusual event on our liturgical calendar because special observances are usually either commemorations of the life of especially notable Saints or to mark significant events in the life and ministry of Jesus. Holy Cross Day is neither of those because it calls attention not to some**ONE** but to some**THING**...the instrument of torture and death that put an end to the earthly life of Jesus.

So, the first thing we need to do on Holy Cross Day is to ask ourselves this question: Why in the world would Christians raise up and celebrate the grisly symbol of a Roman crucifixion? Why wouldn't we want to put out of our mind as soon as possible something so horrible and heinous as this barbaric instrument of oppression and slaughter? Well, I can only tell you that the Christian Church has struggled with that question for a long time. We have always been of a mixed mind and it depends on how you look at the Cross. Is the Cross an evil thing that has no purpose except to reveal, unmask, and forever expose all the forces of religious and political intolerance arrayed against God **or** is the Cross a beautiful reminder to us, a symbol of the infinite love that Jesus has for all of us? For most of its existence the Christian Church has waffled back and forth between these two perspectives, alternately hating and revering the Cross.

During a whole lot of Church History there has been a fascination with finding and preserving what was called "the true cross"—the actual wood upon which Jesus was nailed. Second only to the "holy grail", the cup Jesus used at the Last Supper, the true cross was the primary focus of all sorts of searches and, now and then, people came up with what they believed to be (or were willing to market as) "the real thing." No King or Pope was without a jeweled reliquary supposedly containing wood from the true cross. John Calvin, along with lots of early Protestant reformers, recognized the absurdity of all that hypocritical veneration when he famously remarked that if all the alleged relics of the true cross were piled up in one place there would be enough wood to fill a ship.

Here's another interesting question: Why is September 14 the date chosen for Holy Cross Day? Well, that's an interesting story. After the Emperor Constantine became a Christian (and the Church suddenly went from being illegal and suffering persecution to the status of the official

State religion somewhere around 320 A.D.) he set people to work identifying special places having to do with the life of Jesus. The Bishop of Jerusalem came up with a spot beneath all sorts of rubble that he claimed was probably where Jesus died on the cross and was buried in a nearby tomb. On that highly questionable site a grateful Emperor arranged for the building of an enormous church of "imperial magnificence." Constantine's mother, the Empress St. Helena, supervised the construction of what became the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, which was completed and consecrated September 14, 335 A.D. So, Tuesday turns out to be the 1675th anniversary of that event. But, wait! There's more: According to St. Cyril of Jerusalem, who wrote a letter to the son of the Emperor Constantine, workmen in the process of doing excavation for the Church had found the cross of Jesus. So, you see, Holy Cross Day celebrates both the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and the discovery of the true cross. Quite a day, this September 14.

One more historical footnote before we move on to the here-and-now: Let's pursue this one last question—whatever happened to that most important relic, the true cross? Well, during the crusades the Latin Patriarch suggested that the Christian armies might be undefeatable by the Turks if the true cross were carried ahead of them into battle. You know, it's right there in that hymn, "Onward Christian soldiers marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus going on before." Well, anyway, the inevitable happened. The supposed true cross was captured by the great Muslim general Saladin when Jerusalem fell in 1187 and, that particular cross was never heard of again—a casualty of war, I guess you could say.

Isn't it sad that the cross that was supposed to be a reminder of the high cost of God's **love** should become a symbol of **hate**? For three hundred years waves of crusading Christian warriors descended on the Holy Lands to slaughter Muslims in the name of Jesus. Indeed, the reason that they were called "Crusaders" is specifically because they wore the sign of the cross on their banners and clothing. And it didn't end way back then. It seems that all of human history is, in fact, one long story of Christians taking up the cross not in the name of service or sacrifice but in the name of war and conquest. What an irony—the way the cross gets turned around in our thinking and in our actions. Literally, the cross turned around becomes a sword. Take hold of it at the top rather than the bottom and it becomes a weapon. The instrument intended for the world's salvation becomes a weapon to use against our brothers and sisters.

Think about how a twisted understanding of the cross has lead us back then and even today to use our Faith as a rallying point for hated rather than reconciliation. In the Sudan Christians in the north and Moslems in the south have slaughtered and left homeless millions of innocent families and children. In the former Yugoslavia mostly Catholic Croats and Orthodox Serbs have sought to drive out the Bosnian Moslems. In Northern Ireland Catholics and Protestants continue their warfare in spite of all the peace treaties. In Afghanistan and Iraq, once again, we see Christian armies slugging it out against Muslims. We get into a fear mode and want to prevent the building of a Muslim place of worship at New York City's "Ground Zero." That notable Christian leader Terry Jones wants everyone to help him build a bonfire of Korans. It just keeps on happening; the cross gets turned around to become a weapon. And, of course, we wonder

why peoples of the world mistrust us and engage in terrorism aimed directly at the Christian nations of the world.

Please understand me. I'm not saying that Christians have a monopoly on violence and warfare or that there aren't similar criticisms that could be made of the followers of a whole range of world religions. There's plenty of blame to go around if you want to find fault with Hindus, Muslims, Jews, or any other religious group. My point is not to fix blame. What I'm pointing up here is the absolute silliness of people engaged in death and destruction in the very name of the Prince of Peace. What I want to condemn is the arrogance of carrying out human slaughter while carrying the symbol of the cross—a symbol that is intended to communicate love, justice, peace, and reconciliation.

The point of all this is to say that we probably need the true cross today more than at any time in human history. I don't mean the true cross in the medieval sense of the actual wood on which Jesus was nailed. I mean the "truly understood" cross of Christ. What Christ did was to reverse the cross—not turning it around to use as a weapon—but priding the key for turning upside down our understanding of how much God loves and forgives us. Far from insisting on our own way through power or manipulation, the death of Jesus on the cross tells us that God's way is not domination but love. To take upon Himself the very worst that the world has to offer—all its hatred and violence—and to rise victorious through apparent weakness is the message of the cross. It's a message that is so counter-intuitive, so totally out of touch with what we consider to be reality, that we just don't get it. So we continue to insist on our own way, the way of the world, the way of self-defeating power. To God, reality is just the opposite...the power of reconciliation, peace, unity, and love.

Holy Cross Day is all about the weakness of apparent power and the power of apparent weakness. That conundrum lies at the heart of what the enigmatic symbol of the cross is all about. Only a very few people in human history have been able to understand and embrace that message. Our problem is that we keep on getting Crossways of one another when what we really need is to move together in the ways of the Cross. The call of Jesus to take up our own cross daily and to follow His example of peace is something that seems to us weak and unrealistic. Unless and until more of us listen and learn, the cross will remain nothing but an incomprehensible mystery.

The challenge to us this Holy Cross Day is to take up the cross, make it our own, and let it change our hearts and minds forever. The "true cross." it turns out, is not some old piece of wood to carry around in a jeweled container. It is a determination to follow Jesus, a life-shaping and life-changing commitment of our whole self to the will and purposes of the One who gave Himself for us. It is this same Jesus who calls each one of us—right now, today—to take up our cross and follow Him.