

Homily
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Feast of the Holy Cross
Vigil Mass
September 13, 2009

“And being found in human form, He humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2:8)

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This evening we join those dearly loved ones who were with Jesus at the foot of the Cross—Blessed Mary, his mother, and John, the beloved disciple, and Blessed Mary Magdalene and the other women. As Jesus foretold in our Gospel reading for this Mass, he is lifted high upon the Cross that he might draw all people unto himself. And so tonight we keep vigil for the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, which occurs tomorrow, September 14th.

Mother Church traces the origins of the Feast of the Holy Cross to the dedication of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, in Jerusalem, which was built by Constantine, with his mother, Helena’s blessing and oversight. It was completed and dedicated to the glory of God on September 14, 335 A.D.

From the beginnings of Holy Cross Day in the Eastern Church, where it is considered one of the 12 great feasts of Christendom, its observance spread to the Latin Church in the West. Holy Cross Day was restored to our Anglican calendar in 1561, and became official in our prayer book in 1979. Thus today, the Feast of the Holy Cross is one of our most ancient observances, on the same date, in the one holy catholic and apostolic Church, both East and West. Tomorrow, Roman Catholic Christians, Orthodox Christians, and Anglican Christians join in lifting

high the Cross of Christ—that “faithful Cross, above all other, the one and noble tree, whereon is hung the world’s salvation”.

Devotion to this triumphant sign of our faith, however, is not limited to one day. Earlier this evening we walked the Way of the Cross in the fourteen stations. This devotion may be offered privately or publicly throughout the year. Every Friday, provided no holy day is to be observed, may be kept for a time of special devotion to the Cross of Christ.

No symbol or image, more universally represents our Christian hope, than the Cross. We have placed the Cross on our churches and at our altars, as well as in our homes. The Cross is on our vestments, sacred vessels, and altar linens.

The faithful everywhere make the sign of the Cross. We often wear the Cross, not as mere jewelry, but in witness to that which has been imprinted by Christ, inwardly in our hearts and minds. As the hymn expresses, “Each newborn servant of the Crucified bears on the brow, the seal of him who died.”

The very mention of the Cross, frequently reminds us of images which have particularly moved us. Some of you may recall the discovery of a cross in the ruins of the World Trade Center tragedy in New York. On Thursday of this past week our nation remembered that horrible day, eight years ago. In some inexplicable way, steel beams were broken in a manner which produced a quite recognizable cross. It was large, rough, and rugged, but it was perfectly proportioned in its vertical and horizontal beams.

Another image, which has come to my mind is a very large and impressive crucifix, carved in stone, on the exterior west wall of the Church of the Ascension in Chicago. Beneath it is the inscription, “Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by?” taken from the Book of Lamentations in the Hebrew Bible. This Episcopal church is located in a very busy urban area on North La Salle Street. It is difficult to be neutral about this representation of our Crucified Lord, once one sees him hanging

there. One can either turn away—or call him Lord. As the inscription asks, “Is it nothing to you, all ye who pass by?” When I see this image of Christ Crucified, as I did this spring, in May on the Feast of the Ascension, I’m always inspired and know that Christ is calling me to take up the Cross and follow him. Often as I stand there on the street, before that image of Christ on the Cross, I recall the words of St. Augustine in his Confessions, “A feeling of devotion surged within me, and tears streamed down my face—tears that did me good.” Finally every time I come into this House of Prayer, and especially for this holy feast, I am always deeply moved by the Crucifixion window on the north wall. Look at it. This window and our more recent stations of the Cross often simply overwhelm me. A critic would analyze the artistic expression, which I too admire, but for me, they are holy icons, which I simply let speak to me. May they draw all of us into deeper and deeper contemplation of our Lord’s passion and sacrificial death on the Cross. They are, indeed, holy icons, windows into heaven, visions of the spiritual realm.

And now, let us turn our attention to the words of St. Paul, with which I introduced this homily. He is exhorting his dearly loved Philippian Christians to be guided by the example of their Lord and Savior, especially to follow Christ’s servanthood. He calls them to see Christ, once again, supremely exalted in his death on the Cross.

In the second chapter of his letter to the Philippian Church, Paul writes: “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of man. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.”

This whole passage, of course, must be understood within the context of what has been going on in the Philippian Church. Paul is concerned that they are divided by petty jealousies, selfishness, conceit, and strife. He wishes for them to forsake their trivial disputes. Although he cares a great deal for the Philippians and appreciates their generous offerings for his ministry, he fears they are in danger of falling apart. Sound familiar? In so many aspects, Paul's description of the lack of harmony among the Philippian Christians may apply to our contemporary church. How difficult it often seems to be for the Church to be Christian! How difficult it seems for us to see our mission in lifting up the Cross of Christ in proclamation of his redemptive suffering and love.

Thus, Paul calls the Philippian Church, as well as all of us, to leave behind lesser matters and to be formed by the mind of Christ in faithful discipleship. His whole focus is on keeping how our Lord lived as a servant, acted in humility, and was obedient, even unto death, even death on a cross, no matter how significant or minor other issues might seem to be. This most important guiding truth for the Christian life finds expression in an old hymn: "This is that great thing I know; this delights and stirs me so: Faith in him who died to save, Him who triumphed o'er the grave, Jesus Christ, the Crucified."

Yes, my friends, the agony and death of our Lord on the Cross was ordained from the foundation of creation to give you and me, in Charles Wesley's words "a heart from sin set free." A heart and life set free, which has come to the pathway of repentance, and forgiveness, honors most the One who was "obedient unto death." A man or woman who sets out on the Christian journey toward wholeness of heart and life means far more to the loving and sacred heart of Jesus, than everything else, one may undertake, however good and worthwhile. In his obedience, our Lord Jesus Christ, triumphed and transformed the Cross, that instrument of shame, derision, and death. In him, the Cross becomes the ever

powerful means of his redemptive suffering and love for us and the world's salvation. The Cross of Christ is the Cross of redemption.

We adore thee, O Christ, and

We bless thee,

Because by thy Holy Cross, thou hast redeemed the world.

Amen.