

Tuesday

We have thought of the foolishness of the cross – and how in it we discover the wisdom of God. We have thought of the strength, the power of the cross – a reversal of the power systems of our world, such that Almighty God is revealed in the man Jesus, pinned down, nailed to the cross on which he died.

This evening we turn to think especially of the love of the cross – the fact that it is because of God's love that Jesus offers his life for us, and it is because of that we come to love him – and to love one another - in return. We first listen to St John's account of the crucifixion and death of Jesus.

John 19.16a-28

*So they took Jesus; and carrying the cross by himself, he went out to what is called The Place of the Skull, which in Hebrew is called Golgotha. There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, with Jesus between them. Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross. It read, 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.' Many of the Jews read this inscription, because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin, and in Greek. Then the chief priests of the Jews said to Pilate, 'Do not write, "The King of the Jews", but, "This man said, I am King of the Jews."' Pilate answered, 'What I have written I have written.' When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they took his clothes and divided them into four parts, one for each soldier. They also took his tunic; now the tunic was seamless, woven in one piece from the top. So they said to one another, 'Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see who will get it.' This was to fulfil what the scripture says,*

*'They divided my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots.'*

*And that is what the soldiers did.*

*Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.*

*After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished, he said (in order to fulfil the scripture), 'I am thirsty.' A jar full of sour wine was standing there. So they put a sponge full of the wine on a branch of hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the wine, he said, 'It is finished.' Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.*

And so through John's account of what happens we too become witnesses of Jesus last moments, and of his death. Jesus last instructions are to his mother Mary, and to his friend John. Look after each other. Love one another. You belong together now.

Mary would miss him. And so would John. They would need each other in the future. John would take Jesus' mother Mary into his home. It is normal for a person who is dying to want to leave his family and his friends on good terms with each other. Sadly that doesn't always happen.

But Jesus goes much further. He turns friends into family. He does that today too. The love of the cross restores our relationship with God. And it becomes the foundation for new bonds of love and belonging. Bringing people together in love – the foundation for a new way of being for everyone. So in the Church of God everyone is either our mother or our father or our sister or our

brother. And this brings people together across the street – and across the world. One new humanity is created in Christ crucified. Drawing the whole world to himself.

Shiela Cassidy, human rights campaigner and medical doctor in the 1970s in Chile, who was tortured and imprisoned under Pinochet's regime there – wrote afterwards in her book 'Audacity to Believe' about how she saw the cross of Jesus working for peace in two directions – the vertical – representing our relationship with God, restored by the love of Jesus poured out as he gave his life on the cross. And the horizontal – the arms of the cross, the arms of Christ reaching out in love to everyone, reconciling, making peace. She used this image to describe the two dimensions of the Christian life. Tomorrow we shall be thinking about the cross in everyday life, and will pick up this image again.

But this evening please just consider what it is about the cross that shows you, as it shows me, the love of God.

Jesus did not have to do what he did. He had the choice. In fact he prayed that he wouldn't have to go through with it, but knew it was what he had to do. 'Take this cup from me' he prayed in Gethsemane. It was love that compelled him. Love for the Father. Love for the world. Love for you and me.

Last week I spoke with a man who works in community development in Derby – supporting agencies and organisations working with those living in poverty and various forms of deprivation. These are hard times for so many of us. I asked him what he saw as the biggest problem he encounters at the moment.

His answer came quickly. The biggest problem? Disconnection. Isolation. He sees people coming to 'warm spaces' and meeting others, simply wanting contact, seeking to make real human connection. Making friends. Becoming family. Connection with each other – and in these church hosted 'warm spaces' (many of which now run all year round) in opening up the possibility of connection with God. In an age of online communication, we have forgotten what it is to belong, and to communicate at that deeper level. It was great to see people in coming to that inner city church where we met and finding that connection and rejoicing in it.

And yet – whilst the love of the cross has social implications, it is also profoundly personal. St Paul would write, that 'the Son of God loved me and gave himself for me' – a discovery for each of us to make.

When I was a curate I used to visit Tommy and his family. Tommy was seriously ill, in a wheelchair, with various health problems. His circulation was not good.

His wife and daughter were wonderful, kind, welcoming people, who loved Tommy to bits – despite the fact he was what one would call a rough diamond – a former soldier with quite a past. They came to church – he didn't. But he was always glad to see me – and I liked him – an honest man who found church hard to relate to the tough experiences of his life.

Eventually Tommy had to have a leg amputated, and was in hospital, and things didn't go well. The infection had spread. I was called to see him and his wife in the side room in hospital. Arriving there to see him I was struck by two things. The first was the smell of gangrene – his wife was terribly embarrassed about this. She was struggling with it herself, and going round the room with a room spray trying to make things better. It wasn't going to work. But she couldn't help being preoccupied with it. Tommy really needed her there – but at that time this was a huge struggle for her.

I had with me one of those little wooden 'holding crosses'. I gave it to Tom and we prayed the Lord's prayer. He had no hesitation in doing so. I left him with the holding cross.

I was told when he had died a day or so later that he had held that cross in his hand the whole time, to the end.

And we sang, at his funeral, it was no surprise that they chose to sing 'The Old Rugged Cross' - 'I will cling to the Old Rugged Cross, and exchange it some day for a crown.'

While his nearest and dearest could only think of the embarrassment of the grim smell in that room, Tom held on, knowing that the cross in his hand spoke of a love that held him even then, and that would never let him go. Accepted. Loved. Forgiven. Welcome home.

When Jesus died on the cross, John tells us, he cried out 'it is finished'. This means 'It's done!' The end - but also the beginning, as his disciples began to discover just three days later, and as we discover too in the joy of Easter.

Love's redeeming work is done. Fought the fight, the battle won.

Hold on to that cross.

Know you are held in the love of God.

Know then that because of the Cross of Christ there is forgiveness for the past, acceptance for the present, and God's loving presence with you always, and for ever.

WE ADORE YOU O CHRIST AND WE BLESS YOU. BY YOUR HOLY CROSS YOU HAVE REDEEMED THE WORLD.

Amen.