



The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

Homily for the Holy Cross Day (14th September) 2021

Many crucifixes do not convey much of the torturous agony of the event they commemorate. They are gilded and adorned; a *Christus Rex* has Jesus dressed in Mass vestments; in the images of the window behind me, which you cannot presently see, but of the which a very reasonably priced card can be purchased, the Cross is transformed into a tree - the *Arbor Vitae* or *Tree of Life*, from which the design of the window takes its name.

All of these, in their different ways, are theological portrayals of the Crucifixion, advertng to its deeper significance. Through His Death on the Cross, Christ has secured for us the means and potential for our reconciliation with God - the Salvation of our souls.

It took the Church a while to come to terms with this perspective. Early Christians were quite reluctant to use the Cross as an emblem of their Faith. In today's terms, they thought that it would have been a PR disaster, reminding people that their religion was founded on Someone, Who died an ignominious criminal's death.

Around the AD200, a graffito appeared in a building on the Palatine Hill in Rome, depicting a man praying before a donkey nailed to a cross and entitled, "Alexamenos worships his god." I do not think we know who Alexamenos was, let alone the mocking artist; but it gives us a glimpse of how the Crucifixion was viewed by those outside the membership of the Church.

With the Peace of the Church under the Emperor Constantine, who famously had a cross painted on the shields of his soldiers before his triumphant engagement at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, sentiments began to change. That victory itself, put a different slant on the image of the Cross; but more generally, the perspective of the Fourth Gospel, in particular, that the moment of Jesus' Death was also the moment of His Triumph informed a more confident attitude amongst Christians with regard to the Cross; and artistic representations of it reflected the developing theology.

Whilst, of course, all of this is true and important for our understanding of our Faith, we should never let they layers of theology completely obscure the raw material of the Cross - the brutal execution of Jesus. I often observe that the shadow of the Cross sits at the heart of the flame of the Paschal Light; in the same way, Christ's Passion sits at the heart of our Redemption.

The Cross was exalted by the Self-Sacrifice of Christ; and it is a spirit of self-sacrifice, which, through His free gift of Faith, unites us with Christ, creating a channel for God's sanctifying Grace to work in us His Purpose of Redemption.

As we heard in the Gospel reading last Sunday, self-sacrifice is intrinsic to Christian discipleship. Jesus spoke of this in terms directly alluding to His Crucifixion as He exhorted us to take up our cross.

The image of the Cross, which hangs over our Liturgical assemblies is not just a sign of the hope, which is ours; it is also a challenge, asking us, every time that we gather to pray, whether we have embraced that attitude of self-sacrifice, which is asked of those who would be Christ's followers.