



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

Homily for the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (14th September) 2026

It is generally held that Christianity was slow to adopt the Cross as a symbol in its practice, because it drew attention to Jesus' conflict with the prevailing authorities at a time when the Church was keen to avoid, as it were, provoking further antagonistic attentions. It is a view buttressed by such evidence as the graffito mocking the faith of one Alexamenos.

Yet, after the Peace of the Church, the Cross was quickly rehabilitated. The story of Constantine's conversion involves a vision of the Cross and his mother's almost kleptomaniacal gathering of artefacts of the Passion, famously included the discovery of the wood of the Cross, much of which she is said to have brought back to Rome, bits of which are still present in the Basilica of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme, where she put them.

Yet the seeds, at least, of this embrace of the Cross lie in the New Testament texts. In the first chapter of his former Epistle to the Church in Corinth, Saint Paul, whilst recognising that the Cross can impede the Christian mission, being, as it was, "A stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles;" Never-the-less, "To us who are being saved, it is the power of God."

In due course, as those who were present at Evensong will have noticed, the Cross acquires quasi personality. In the office hymn and again in the *Magnificat* antiphon, we address the Cross directly: it has come alive - or, perhaps more accurately, we came to discern the life, which was infused into it as it fulfilled its grisly purpose.

Bearing the Christ as He approached the culmination of His saving Sacrifice, it was drawn into the Mystery of Redemption: not just an inert sign of Jesus' Death, but a symbol of His redeeming work in the strong sense of a symbol - something, which shares in the reality of the thing it symbolises.

The Cross, therefore, is not simply an item, which absorbs our gaze, but which permits the eyes of faith to see through it into the eternal realities of which it was a part. At the centre of those realities, of course, is Christ Himself and so, the Cross was grafted into Him - as we say of ourselves when we are baptized.

In the same way that we honour the lives of the saints, because in them we see the triumph of Christ over the sin, which besets us all, so, likewise, we gather today to celebrate not simply an instrument of death, but one that has, as we shall hear in a little while, "Has become for Christ a throne of Glory;" and through Its life-giving power has, "Revealed the power of Christ crucified."

Ecclesiastical processions are often led by a representation of the Cross, indicating that in our journey through this world, we are called to follow where the Cross leads: by our choices and actions, to become thrones of Christ's Glory and revealing His power: a power, as the Epistle this evening intimates, exercised not through coercion, but through Self-sacrificial love; and it is in the embrace of this knowledge, with represents the triumph - the exaltation - of the Cross.

Ironically, in our present day, it is this signification of self-sacrifice, as much, if not more, that the association of the cross with shameful death, which might constitute a stumbling block and folly. Yet, these are marks of Christian discipleship - and qualities, which permit the Cross, with the image of which we are signed at Baptism, to live in us.