Sermon from Coventry Cathedral

Preacher: Kathryn Fleming, Canon Pastor
Date: 14th September 2014
Event: The Cathedral Eucharist
Readings: Philippians 2:6-11, John 3:13-17
Theme: Holy Cross Day

“Behold the wood of the cross, on which hung the Saviour of the world! Come let us worship…”

Part of the proclamation of the cross that is included in the liturgy of Good Friday for thousands of churches across the world – but this is September, and in an on-line conversation last week some friends were completely baffled that Holy Cross day remains in our calendar at all. After all, since we know that the strife is o’er, the battle won and the cross, like the tomb, is empty – what need of a further observance?

And on one level, this could be right. Certainly the origins of the feast might well give you pause, rooted in St Helena’s pilgrimage to the holy places of Jerusalem, and her conviction that she had found the site of the crucifixion and of Christ’s burial – and close by, 3 crosses buried. Though an early chronicler insisted All held it as certain that one of these crosses was that of our Lord Jesus Christ, and that the other two were those of the thieves who were crucified with Him.

I’d guess most of us would be inclined to approach the discovery with a little more scepticism…However, in no time Helena had overseen the building of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and as the years passed, the longing of the faithful to have access to even a splinter of the true cross snowballed until it was drastically out of hand. Hardly a church or monastery was without its relic so that at the Reformation Calvin complained “If all the pieces that could be found were collected together, they would make a big ship-load. Yet the Gospel testifies that a single man was able to carry it.”

So if we see today as but an excursion into cultic extravagance and superstition, then it is only right and proper to be cautious. But, touch wood the cross seems to have survived this. It remains a popular symbol, chosen as jewellery, as tattoos, as memorials by many who would never claim to follow the crucified one. Strange indeed.

It is hard to imagine anyone choosing to wear a little golden gibbet or a beautifully crafted electric chair pendant round their neck – but it is not this that creates a scandal.

The shock, the scandal comes when the Saviour of the world hangs here - HERE upon that instrument of death...

How can this be…?

Can we grasp, even for a moment, what Paul is celebrating as he quotes that early hymn?

This is God – GOD – the creator of all, the one who holds the universe in being, deliberately choosing to throw in his lot with his creation, to identify with us in an act of such deep and utter commitment that he not only lives a human life but dies a human death, entering into the darkness and experiencing for himself that moment when he can do nothing but surrender.

Total abandonment – to the human condition and to the ultimate purpose of love.

How can this be?

It is, in one way, nothing new. God has always been utterly committed to and connected with his people, their rescue and renewal prefigured by Moses but perfected by Christ. Those who looked at the bronze serpent erected by Moses, trusting in God, escaped death…They looked at an emblem of their trouble, and were healed.

Jesus, lifted high and suffering death himself, offers the route for all of us to escape death forever.
But we have to look with the eyes of faith – to really see the true light that has come into the world, to recognise that God’s glory is present as fully as Christ hangs on the cross as it is when he bursts from the tomb in the joy of Easter morning.

We have to look – BEHOLD the wood of the cross...

One of my earliest memories is of looking out of the window on the bus ride home from town, and finding myself eye to eye with the Christ figure on the crucifix that still hangs outside Christ Church, St Leonards...

Having looked at Jesus I asked my mother what was written underneath. The words came from the Reproaches – “Is it nothing to you, all you that pass by” – and I felt overwhelming sadness for it seemed that nobody else on the bus was looking, that maybe none of them cared.

Even then it seemed obvious that the cross demands a decision, a response...

You cannot truly SEE the One who is hanging there and do nothing...

He hangs there to draw the all people to himself but He will never constrain, never demand. Instead, he opens his arms in an embrace wide enough for all the world and says “SEE how much I love you” but it is your decision whether or not to accept that invitation to be loved.

To accept carries with it the responsibility to pass on the love we have been given, to do all that we can to communicate its overwhelming reality, to live so that others can see for themselves the truth of what Love can do. We are to lift high the cross, and with it the Son of Man, so that all may see the route to eternal life. I once asked a class of 9 year olds to count the crosses they could find in our church, reminding themselves whenever they saw one “THAT’S how much God loves me”....Before their visit left I asked how many they’d found, expecting a couple of dozen, perhaps a few more. But one small boy announced proudly “Hundreds and hundreds Kathryn”... because he had counted every intersection of the tiles on the floor, seen crosses wherever right angles met. And of course he was right. The evidence of God’s love cannot really be calculated or recorded.

THAT’S how much he loves us.

Whereas in Holy Week we are often caught up in the liturgical drama, already emotionally exhausted by the highs and lows of the journey from triumphal entry to empty tomb, but straining ahead to Easter joy, today is something quite different.

Today we can simply pause and ponder.

As so often, the poet-priest Malcolm Guite says it best: this is part of his series of sonnets for Holy Week

“See, as they strip the robe from off his back
And spread his arms and nail them to the cross,
The dark nails pierce him and the sky turns black,
And love is firmly fastened onto loss.
But here a pure change happens. On this tree
Loss becomes gain, death opens into birth.
Here wounding heals and fastening makes free
Earth breathes in heaven, heaven roots in earth.
And here we see the length, the breadth, the height
Where love and hatred meet and love stays true
Where sin meets grace and darkness turns to light
We see what love can bear and be and do,
And here our saviour calls us to his side
His love is free, his arms are open wide.”
So – beyond excess and superstition, beyond apathy and over-familiarity, let us glory in the cross of Christ once more...and let us ask, too, for the grace to empty ourselves so that we may be filled with and transformed by the Love that is hanging on the tree.

Behold the wood of the cross, on which hung the Saviour of the world.

Come, let us worship.