

THE POWER OF THE CROSS

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Text: For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved, it is the power of God.

The single enduring symbol of Christianity throughout the ages has been that of the cross. It is a symbol which was originally the sign for a shameful death; but through the death of our Lord it has been transformed into a symbol of triumph and glory. The sign of the cross, that rude frame of rough timber upon which Jesus suffered and died, has lived as a potent force in the lives of Christians since the days of the apostles. It has traveled all over the world and been planted on every shore. The explorers carried along with their compasses the cross. But more important it has lived in the hearts of countless Christians as a sign of enduring and eternal power. Since the day when Paul said "the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved, it is the power of God". Christians have looked to the cross as a source of divine strength. A learned Jew at the time of Paul said "no religion can live whose founder was slain as a common criminal and whose symbol is a cross. But the cross has grown through the years to triumph over all enemies; its power endures to our day.

Let us think this evening on the sign of the cross, what it has meant to the Christians who have gone before us, and what it means to us today. Let us see how as Paul says "to those which are saved, it is the power of God." The early Christians believed firmly in the power of the cross. Even the sign of the cross possessed a power that was divine, and if a Christian could own a piece of the cross of Jesus, he could avail himself of the power of Christ at all times. And so the early Christians carried around bits of wood believed to be parts of the original cross: There was probably little likelihood that they actually had pieces of the original but their belief was strong enough to make the symbol meaningful. Whenever they were asked to do a task, whenever they set out to do something, they used to touch the piece of wood to signify that with the power of the Cross they could do what was asked. And this sign of the cross has endured to the present day although few are aware of it. For most of us when we determine to do something often tap on wood. We have forgotten the reason for it, but this habit or superstition, call it what you will, goes back to the practice of the early Christians of touching the wood of Christ's cross. And there are other carry overs in our modern life of the power of the sign of the cross although for the most part they have lost their significance. For the early and medieval Christians the cross was a talisman, which protected them from harm and gave them power. Few of us today think of the symbol of the cross in this way consciously, and yet how many of us cross our fingers at a moment of crisis. Keep your fingers crossed, we say, but we do not consider in so doing that we are making the sign of the cross. And it is not a coincidence either that we say, cross my heart, when we wish to convince someone of our sincerity. Today when we are through with a meal, we lay our knife and fork very carefully parallel to each other near the top of our plates. But not long before the days of Emily Post no one would think of setting down their knife and fork, unless they placed them in the form of the cross. For in the Middle Ages the monks were carefully instructed to do this and the practice spread to secular life and continued until almost our own day.

The cross is woven into the very fabric of our lives whether we are conscious of it or not. Wherever we look we see the cross. Have you ever noticed how the panels of most doors are made? There are usually two small panels at the top and two longer ones at the bottom of the door. And the pieces of wood which separate these panels form the sign of the cross. There is probably a door like this somewhere in each of your homes, but few of us realize that the sign of the cross is there. This is no coincidence either. In the sixteenth century the carpenters' guild in Germany adopted the sign of the cross as the symbol of their guild, it being the custom that each guild have a distinguishing trademark. And the carpenters chose the cross and worked it into the doors of each house they built, to provide everyone with the power of the cross. During the Lenten Season it is customary to eat buns decorated with a cross formed by sugar icing. In medieval times people believed that bread thus marked was consecrated, that it could never become corrupt and mold or rot. Today we think of hot cross buns as just buns, and yet we think they are a little special. The cross would be famous if it were only for its use during the time of the Crusades when under its shadow the knights battled against the crescent of the Muhammadans. Each Crusader had his tunic and armor decorated with the cross, and believed that by its power he was carrying on a holy war. And in later history Joan of Arc led the armies of France to victory with this sign as her guiding source of power. In olden times people were buried at a crossroads for a very definite purpose. People thus buried were usually suicides who had forfeited the right to salvation by taking their own lives. And so they were buried in unmarked graves because they could not be laid in the consecrated grounds of a church cemetery; and yet, the cross of the cross roads might possibly give them the power to be saved. Today the symbol of the cross has a noble place as the symbol of the Red Cross Organization. [Christmas]

The cross has played such a vital part in the lives of the Christians of the ages that its influence is seen everywhere; we cannot escape from this sign. Whether we are conscious of it or not, the cross faces us almost everywhere we look. And it has meant various things to different people throughout the years. It is a simple figure in form, and yet in the world today there are over four hundred different forms of it. And there are just as many different ideas of what it means. Today we do not have the same faith and belief in the cross that the early and medieval Christians had. We in the Protestant church, at least, do not believe any more that it has a miraculous power in itself in spite of the fact that we still retain some carryovers of this ancient faith. We do not believe as did those people of the Middle Ages that a cross on the door will keep witches and evil spirits away. We do not believe that carrying an image of the cross will be a talisman against harm. We have spiritualized our interpretation of the cross and see in it a source of inspiration and spiritual power which comes not from a piece of wood or metal, but from God. We know that the cross does not mean quite the same thing to us as it did to these earlier Christians. But if it does not mean the same thing, if we have given it a spiritual interpretation, what exactly should it mean to us today? There are over four hundred different forms of the cross in the churches and homes of the Christian world. How many forms are there in the hearts of men? We have lost the early type of belief in the cross; but what should it mean to us today?

It is important that we do know what the cross should mean, for as we look back and turn back the pages of history, we see that men have used the cross as the power behind. Deeds which Jesus would never have condoned. The terrible Spanish Inquisition was carried out under the

shadow of the cross. Witches were burned according to the divine judgment which the cross symbolized. We should understand the meaning behind the sign of this cross which we honor so conspicuously in our everyday life, and find the source of the power of God which it gives. The cross is the power of God, Paul tells us. Crosses are the ladders which lead us to heaven, for without the cross there can be no crown.

We can best see the meaning of the cross for us today if we try to understand exactly what it meant in the life of our Lord. By reflecting on the story of the crucifixion, we see how Jesus suffered for our sins and faced death with the calm assurance that he was committing himself to God's care. And with the power of God he was enabled to be victorious over the cross and change the symbol of defeat to one of triumph.

Today as we look at the cross we are reminded that there are ruinous forces at work in the world which threaten us. Just as in the days of Jesus the cross symbolized the evil forces that conspired unsuccessfully to destroy him. The world is still full of wickedness which must constantly be combated and destroyed; the religious name for this wickedness is sin. In man there are ruinous and suicidal tendencies that conspire to destroy the godlike in man, forces of evil and sin which are forever threatening anew to crucify the Christ in us. The sins to which we are all prey are too manifold and familiar to require enumeration, but some of them become so familiar that we are likely to take them for granted. For example the sin of slander and gossip is so familiar that we are all too likely to accept it as normal and not too serious. But this as much as anything else conspired to crucify our Lord as malicious tongues spread misunderstanding and hate about him. Our secular life today is shot through with sins which keep recrucifying Christ by destroying the ideals for which he lived and died. Racial prejudice born of a false belief in one's superiority destroys the ideal of the brotherhood of man which Jesus taught. And war keeps the Prince of Peace suffering still on his cross. A British sergeant in the last war said that it seemed to him that every shot which passed between the lines went through the body of Christ who stood between the warring children of God. In our modern world we are developing a contempt for the sacredness of personality, destroying the ideal that Jesus taught that all men are precious in the sight of God. In our personal life sins like unchastity no longer seem to shock or worry us. It is the expression of sex we say and quite natural. But it shows the same contempt for personality that was shown when a mob drunk with hate hanged Jesus on a cross. But if one believes himself redeemed by Christ, he cannot hold himself cheap.

The cross then, first reminds us of the evil forces at work in the world, for as we look at it we are reminded of the evil which crucified Jesus. We do not completely understand why this evil is in the world; we have no answer for it and can point to no solution. But we do have a figure to set before our mind's eye, a Fellow Sufferer who died placing himself in the hands of God. And by his faith in the power of God he became victorious over the forces of evil and triumphed over them. And as we look at the Figure of Jesus we see the power of God shining through the darkness of sin and dispersing the shades of evil as the sun scatters a morning mist. Then we can become encouraged and inspired and know with Paul that the cross is the Power of God. Then the cross becomes transformed in our eyes to a symbol of victory as we see God's power conquering even over this. With the example of Jesus before us we can know that God through us is strong enough to meet every evil we face. This knowledge gives us such a new and

refreshing outlook that we say we enter a new life and are saved from evil and sin through our faith in Christ.

We must remember however that the cross means the power of God,

that Jesus is the Savior, only to those who obey the will of God. The cross means redemption for us not so much through faith alone, but through sacrifice and service. An African convert to Christianity, one who had spent his life in the darkness of the Belgian Congo, expressed this idea cogently and beautifully when he said, "The cross of Christ condemns me to be a saint." Christ is Savior to those who obey him, and follow his example. We find the power of the cross as we dedicate our lives to the life he led and follow his teachings. Just as Jesus found the power of God in a life of service and sacrifice for his fellow man, so we can partake of this power as we live to carry out the will of God. Just as Jesus transformed the cross from defeat to victory so we can transform the evils we see in the world to show the glory of God. But we cannot partake of this power of the cross, this power which comes from God and still retain our sinful natures by accepting and adding to the evils of the world. We must be worthy of the risen Christ whose spirit is always with us when we listen for it. We must use the power of God to destroy sin and evil wherever we find them, for only then do we have the power of God. And if we become discouraged and faint as we see how far from measuring up to the spirit of Christ our world is, when the evils and sorrows seem too great to bear, remember that it was a man who knew Calvary who said: God is Love.

In conclusion: the cross is no longer to us a magic object which has power in itself. It is a symbol of spiritual aspiration and power if we but heed its meaning. But when we fail to answer its call to take it up and follow Jesus, when we persist in following evil instead we are crucifying the spirit of Jesus anew. Edwin

Arlington Robinson expresses this message in his poem Calvary better than any words of mine might do.

Friendless and faint, with martyred steps and slow,

Faint for, the flesh, but for the spirit free,

Stung by the mob that came to see the show,

The Master toiled along to Calvary;

We jibed him as he went, with houndish glee,

Till his dimmed eyes for us did overflow;

We cursed his vengeless hands thrice wretchedly,

And this was nineteen hundred years ago.

But after nineteen hundred years the shame
Still clings, and we have not made good the loss
That outraged faith has entered in his name.
Ah, when shall come love's courage, to be strong!
Tell me, O Lord tell me, O Lord, how long
Are we to keep Christ writhing on the Cross!
How long? The answer is for you to decide.
May the power of the cross lead you.