

THE SIGN OF THE CROSS I

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I invite you to think with me on the Cross of Christ, that Cross which looms so darkly on Good Friday, upon which God's love is poured out for man's sin. At the time of that first Friday this cross seemed to mark the bitter end of a gentle religion of love. Yet, as we know, by the miracle of the Resurrection the dark cross of defeat became a shining symbol of victory, and its light spread to disperse the darkness and helplessness not only of Good Friday, but also of the whole world.

I invite you to meditate with me on this Cross, how the sign of this Cross in so many ways has infused our whole culture. The Cross is woven into the very fabric of our lives, but so familiar has it become, that we often fail to see its sign. And if we fail to see its sign, we may well fail to sense and live its spirit.

There are certain obvious examples of the pervading influence of the Cross which we recognize. We are familiar with its use as a sign of mercy and help, as the Red Cross. But it comes as a surprise to some to see that great churches and cathedrals are built in the shape of a cross as a reminder to those who worship there. It does not take much imagination to see that when we cross our fingers, as we often do when a tense situation lies before us, we are really invoking the power of the Cross. We do this, I am afraid, thoughtlessly, as a kind of superstition, forgetting the meaning behind the action — just as some wear crosses as a kind of costume jewelry with little thought to what is symbolized. And when little children in order to attest to their sincerity, say, "Cross my heart", few of us realize that the invocation of the Cross of Christ lies behind the custom.

There are historical examples of all kinds which show how the sign of the Cross is woven into our lives. We remember the Knight Templar who emblazoned the cross on his shield not only as identification in battle and a sign of loyalty, but also as a means of invoking the power and protection of God. In the Lenten season we are accustomed to hot cross buns. We no longer believe as did the faithful in the Middle Ages that bread so marked was holy and incorruptible — yet these buns are something special. Again, it is our custom today when we finish a meal to place the knife and fork parallel on the edge of the plate. But it is not so long ago that a different custom prevailed. People were taught to cross the knife and fork in the center of the plate to remind them of the Cross and the need to give thanks. One of the most interesting examples of the use of the sign of the Cross is the old practice of burying under a crossroads the body of one who had taken his own life. Such a person was not permitted to be buried in consecrated church cemeteries, and so the bereaved buried him where the sign of the Cross might somehow still help.

How closely the Cross touches us where we least suspect it! Most of us have at some time or other followed the old practice of rapping on wood in the face of uncertainty or danger. But few of us recognize in this the use of the Cross. In early Christian times the Cross of Christ was

believed to have been rediscovered — and bits of this sacred relic were carried about by the faithful. And when danger threatened or a grave undertaking, they would touch the wood, thereby invoking the power of God through the Cross. We continue the practice with no notion of the symbolic meaning.

The Cross is indeed all about us, but we fail to see it. It appears in the homes of many of us unseen. Have you ever noticed how ordinary doors are made, or used to be made? There are two small panels at the top, two longer ones at the bottom, and the cross pieces separating them form the sign of the Cross. This saves weight and material. But there is a further reason. The Carpenters' Guild in the Middle Ages chose the cross as the mark of their guild and determined to build it into every home they built. The door is the sign of the Cross.

If we fail to see even the symbol, perhaps it is not strange that we fail to see its meaning in our lives. It has been said that there are over four hundred different forms of the cross in use. How many different ideas of it do we carry around in our heads? Surely there are wrong notions associated with the sign of the Cross in history. We cannot believe that there is a magic charm about the sign, and use it to frighten demons. It is not a kind of rabbit's foot, a touchstone of magic power. Nor can we be sanguine about the wrong uses to which the Cross has been put in history, the bloody inquisitions and holy wars that were anything but holy. The Cross does not mean magic to us. But what does it mean, this Cross which is all about us?

Paul knew the varieties and the difficulties of interpreting the meaning of the Cross. He writes: "We preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness. But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God". The Cross is the perennial symbol of the great drama of redemption enacted on Calvary; to those who are called it is the power of God.

The sign of the Cross did not mean this to everyone. To the Jews it was a stumbling block, for it was the sign of defeat, the hangman's noose, bringing to an end the hopes of a Messiah. He saved others; himself he could not save. And so the crowds turned away in disappointment or disdain. And this is not an isolated attitude in history. The sign of the cross is still a stumbling block for many of us today. How often we ask the question, "Why doesn't God do something?" Why must the cause of evil prosper and the cause of good suffer a cross? Why must there be suffering in a world created by a good God? We cannot see that through the Cross, the very suffering, the power of God is liberated. We stumble over the Cross, turn aside in despair or disappointment, because we cannot see how victory can lie there. Perhaps our stumbling is due to blindness. We cannot see through the suffering. And our blindness may well be due to our concentration upon personal happiness as the goal of life. Surely the Cross cannot square with that, we feel. We have forgotten that we are called upon to be good, not to be happy, and goodness requires that we take a share of the load of suffering which results from evil. The Cross is witness that such goodness cannot be defeated, and die.

The Cross is a stumbling block to those who see in it only defeat. But there are others who see in it utter nonsense. These are the Greeks whom Paul knew very well. Schooled in philosophy, rich in humanistic wisdom, complacent in their classic calm, they found the preaching of the Cross

sheer foolishness. It is interesting to remember that Paul's preaching in Athens did not result in the founding of a church. His preaching on Mars Hill was eloquent, but a failure. The sophisticated Athenians were not impressed by the figure of an ignorant fisherman, one who never went to college, one who knew no philosophy. The Cross, as Paul points out, just didn't make sense to them. Gods don't die, and suffering cannot solve anything.

Still the same view is among us today. How can suffering cure evil? What sense does Jesus' ethic of love make in a world where the Golden Rule is twisted to read, "Do unto others before they do you"? The same pride that blinded the Greeks blinds us all too often to the meaning of the Cross, and we show by our attitudes and actions, if not our words, that the Cross is foolishness.

Perhaps we fail to see the sign of the Cross which is all about us because we find it either a stumbling block or foolishness. There is the meaning which Paul teaches, however, which, once recaptured, will bring us to the power and wisdom of God. And that is to see the Cross as the sign of Christ crucified with all the wealth of significance that this central doctrine of our faith brings to us. The Cross takes us directly to that scene on Calvary, and, as Augustine pointed out, we cannot witness this drama unmoved. We either stand with the jeering throng, or turn to Him on the Cross.

We see with horror the Man of God suffering for the sins of man, and realize the manifold sins which crucify the god-like in every age. And the wisdom which Paul calls the foolishness of this world comes home to us. We see that only love will cast out hate and only goodness can destroy evil. We know that there is a redemptive power of love from God, and trust that this is the power that triumphs. This redemptive power of love, the heart of the Cross, emerges for those who take up the Cross and bear it.

The story is told of some American tourists, a man and wife, who came to see the famous Passion Play at Oberammergau. They were visiting with the actor who played the part of Christ just as he was preparing for the scene in which he follows the Via Dolorosa to Calvary. The woman turned to her husband and said, "Why don't we take a picture of you with the cross!" They asked the actor politely for the use of his cross for a moment, and when he assented, the man bent to lift the cross on his back, but it was too heavy. "Why in heaven's name do you make it so heavy?" he asked. "One made of papier mache would look as well." And the actor replied, "Sir, I could not play the part of Christ if I did not feel the weight of His cross."

We cannot play the part of Christians with paper crosses. Nor can we play the part of Christians when the Cross is a vague sign of an ugly death or a way of life we cannot quite believe. Nor are we Christians if we fail to see the Cross all about us. We are Christians as we take the burden of the suffering of the Cross in the confidence of God's redemptive love. "We preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness. But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God."