

THE SIGN OF THE CROSS II

by Lester J. Start

Undated

The single enduring symbol of Christianity has been, as everyone knows, the cross. It is so familiar that we take for granted its meaning of triumph and victory. But not everyone realizes that the cross has undergone an amazing transformation in order to serve as the Christian symbol. Originally the cross meant something quite different. It was the sign of defeat and ignominious death, for it was the method of Roman execution reserved for the lowest criminals. Far from being a sign of victory, it was akin to what the electric chair, or hangman's noose would signify today. No wonder Josephus, the great Jewish historian, could write, "No religion can live whose founder was slain ... and whose symbol is a cross."

And yet because of the wonder of the resurrection the cross was transformed into a symbol of victory. Paul could say that the preaching of the cross "is to them that perish foolishness; but with us who are saved it is the power of God." However we interpret the resurrection experience, this much is clear: something happened. Something happened to change the disciples from a scattered group of disheartened and defeated men whose candidate for the Messiah had been shamefully slain, to a stout band of zealous missionaries who successfully spread their conviction that their Lord was not dead but alive forever more. And the dark cross of Calvary changed also. Its oppressive and ominous shadow became illumined and transformed. It loomed larger in victory than in defeat and spread, lighting the darkness of misery and helplessness through all the world. The hope of the cross was carried by Paul throughout the Roman world. It was carried by the early explorers along with the compass and was planted on every shore. And most important, it has been carried in the hearts of faithful Christians of all generations as the sign of the power of God.

The cross has been woven into the very fabric of our lives through its long history as the symbol of our faith. It has infused our whole culture. And yet so often we fail to see its sign. There are certain obvious examples of the pervading influence of the cross which we recognize. But it comes as a surprise to some to see that great churches and cathedrals are built in the form of a cross as a reminder to those who worship there. We are familiar with its use as a sign of mercy and help as illustrated by the Red Cross. 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. And yet, how often we do this as a kind of superstition, forgetting the meaning behind the action! And when little children in order to attest to their sincerity say, "Cross my heart", how many of us realize that the invocation of God through the cross lies behind the ancient 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 of the Crusades who emblazoned the cross on his shield not only as a sign of his loyalty, but also as a means of invoking the power and protection of God. In the Lenten season we are accustomed to eating hot cross buns. We no longer believe as did the faithful in the Middle Ages that bread so marked was holy and incorruptible, and yet these buns are indeed something special. Again, it is our custom today when we finish a meal to

place our knife and fork parallel to each other on the outer edge of our plate. But it is not so long ago that the custom was different. People were taught to cross the knife and fork in the middle of their plates to remind them of the cross and the need for giving thanks. One of the most interesting examples of the use of the sign of the cross is the ancient practice of burying under a crossroads a man 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, some way, help this poor soul.

How intimately the cross touches us where we least expect it. Most of us at some time or another have followed the old habit of rapping on wood in the face of uncertainty or danger. But few have realized that this is again making use of the sign of the cross. The practice goes back to the early Christians, many of whom carried about bits of wood which they believed were parts of the original cross. When danger threatened, or when a grave undertaking faced them, they would touch the wood, thereby signifying that by the power of God through the cross they would be able to endure. We continue the old habit and fail to see the reason behind it. The cross is indeed all about us, but we fail to see it. It appears in the homes of most of us and yet so often it is not seen. Have you ever noticed how an ordinary cupboard or kitchen door is made? There are two small panels at the top and two longer ones at the bottom, and the cross pieces which separate them form the sign of the cross. This is no accident, either. In the Middle Ages the guilds or trades each chose their own special mark. The carpenter's guild chose the cross, and determined to build the sign of the cross into every house they built to protect it from demonic forces. And so the door shows the sign of the cross, but so many people fail to see it.

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-mâché 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."