

**Exaltation of the Holy Cross  
September 14, 2008**

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**In the year 325, St. Helena, the mother of the Emperor Constantine, set out for the Holy Land to recover mementos of Christ's life. The following year in Jerusalem, she had a relatively new temple to the Greek goddess Aphrodite excavated, and discovered a cross buried underneath. There were actually three crosses found, but when a paralyzed man touched one of them, he was instantly healed. Thus began the long standing tradition of the veneration of the Holy Cross.**

**Ten years later, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher was dedicated on that site and remains there to this day. The church was dedicated on what would have been September 14, 335.**

**But in the early seventh century, Persians again sacked Jerusalem and carried off the cross. The Byzantine Emperor Heraclitus defeated the Persian armies and returned the cross, after it had a brief sojourn in Constantinople, to its rightful place in Jerusalem. That two-day, huge celebration also occurred on September 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> in the year 628. From that date the entire Western church has celebrated this feast on this day. The Eastern churches have an equally long tradition. These are the facts of how we get to**

today.

We celebrate today a very old feast. The cross of Christ remains the most potent and universal symbol of Christian faith. But it is not the oldest. And for good reasons.

The cross is a paradoxical and difficult sign. It was only rarely used in the earliest centuries. The catacombs in Rome, for instance, are much more likely to have symbols of the fish (*ichthys*) engraved in them. Or the letters for *Chi Ro*, most likely initials of the Greek word the Christ. But the cross is conspicuously absent until after Constantine abolished crucifixion as a means of capital punishment. Oddly enough, that occurred the year his mother set out for Jerusalem.

The cross was too ambivalent for the very early Christians. The Roman landscapes outside all Provincial towns were still littered with crosses, often with decaying bodies still hanging on them. The cross was an unusually cruel form of torture used in the Roman Empire for hundreds of years.

The cross remains to this day a symbol of quite paradoxical significance, which we sometimes miss. In fact, some might even call what we celebrate today oxymoronic: we venerate a “holy” cross. The late George Carlin could have had a field day with it (like jumbo shrimp)! The words do not go

together. They never did in reality, despite the fact that we, centuries later, have Holy Cross cemeteries, and Holy Cross cathedrals, and even a College of the Holy Cross. We seem to have lost the ironic sense of the words in conjunction. We would never talk about a sacred gallows, or the blessed electric chair. Yet that's what the cross and specifically the "Holy Cross" does. The very earliest Christians recognized a profound ambivalence in their hearts. And they were very careful about embracing the Cross too quickly.

There are interesting questions raised that have implications for our own lives. For example, is the point of the cross that Christians should seek out suffering themselves in order to identify with Christ as a model? Is Jesus dying just to satisfy some cosmic debt? Is he dying because of some noble fidelity to his convictions? The cross, and all it symbolizes, has prompted these questions down through the centuries. And yet it seems at the same time there are even bigger questions. The Cross of Christ has many layers.

Many of our theological theories of atonement are now "out for repairs," to use a phrase Avery Dulles once used of some other theological theories. Some of the theologies of the cross have been almost gruesome. Take, for example, one of the theologies that suggests God demands the death of God's son in order to ransom us from our sins. It sounds like a

**masochistic piece of sacred violence. Rene Girard and others reject this notion completely. It simply cannot be that violent and be God's work.**

**Other times it seems like we are saying God demands this human sacrifice in spite of all the preaching of the prophets that God does not want human—or any other kind of—sacrifice. In fact God actually demands the end of all sacrifice. That Jesus lives and dies as one of us is precisely in order that no one ever need do it again.**

**Which is it? I'm afraid many of us still waffle and can't decide really. You might want to ask yourself the question today: how do I really relate to and understand the cross of Christ in my life? What does it mean? How do I identify with it—or not? Or am I one of the ones who just remain confused and don't think about it much.**

**We proclaim the Cross of Christ as the ultimate saving and life giving act of God. The once and for all blessing of healing for our world. That's the point that Moses' story tells, and John's and St. Paul's today.**

**But we do need to be careful. As Mark Heim, in his recent book *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross*, asks: "How could the same thing [the event of the cross] be experienced as liberating and transforming on one hand and as destructive and perverse on the other?" If we are not very careful, the**

**Holy Cross can be either. And our own suffering and death is riding on our answer.**

**There are many levels to this event and mystery. The cross has at least three sides. Christian artistic interpretations usually take one of the three forms. There is the crucifix of the suffering Jesus (behind our main altar), the simple sign of the empty cross (our very own Good Friday cross on display today in the Gathering Space), and the image of Christ in glory on the cross (very common in contemporary depictions). As Heim again says: “Our faith cannot do without any of these images and their meanings.” The cross has at least three sides—a paradox in itself.**

**And we are left with the Cross of faith. As Jesus says in John’s gospel: “when I am lifted up, I will draw all things to myself.” All things. And all peoples. It is already accomplished, once and for all, by Him. And so we can sing on Good Friday: Behold the wood of the cross on which has hung the salvation of the world. Come let us worship—the mystery of death that leads to life.**