

**Sermon, 14 September 2008—Proper 19 & Holy Cross**  
Exodus 14:19-31; Psalm 114; Romans 14:1-12; John 21:31-6

Our Prayerbook gives the 14<sup>th</sup> of September as the Feast of the Holy Cross and the 21<sup>st</sup> of September as the Feast of the Evangelist Matthew, so we are acknowledging them and celebrating them by using both the Collect and the Gospel for each feast on their day and by reflecting on them. To remember the Holy Cross is, like Trinity Sunday, a commemoration of a Christian mystery, rather than of a person or of an event. We are reflecting, not on the story of the crucifixion, but on the power released by the cross itself. The cross is a spiritual secret, one of God's counterintuitive truths. How can an imperial scaffold become the tree of life?

The first thing to say, without which nothing else makes sense, is that to be a Christian is to see the cross in the light released by the open and empty tomb of Jesus. The cross alone is a thing of dark oppressive horror, but when we stare at it in the light of the life God bestows, it comes into focus and falls into place. After the Resurrection, the cross lost its ability to end the story. God has more to do with us and for us than to let us die—but we don't fully realize that until death enters our life. The cross, seen after the Resurrection, is the pledge that what God intends for us is larger than the natural frame within which human life runs its course. The Gospel is not the proclamation that Jesus was executed. It is the proclamation that God raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus must really have died for the full depth of God's reach and the full scope of God's life-giving power to be known.

Of course, the cross is the pattern of God's intervention in human history. This is the meaning of the Exodus story we heard today. The Hebrew slaves who had escaped Egypt found themselves trapped between

the Red Sea and the Egyptian army—a certain death. But Moses said to them, “The LORD will fight for you; you have only to keep still.” God enters to act. Those who think that the accumulations and negotiations and achievements and campaigns of human power are what matters always dash themselves to pieces when God acts. Those who already know that their grasp of human power is slight and feeble, for whom the cross is all too familiar, find in the Holy Cross the reminder that all their hope and strength is in God. The cross is glorious because God has defeated it. One of the reasons it is lifted high is so it can be seen as the arsenal of evil that God has captured and broken—just as the people of Israel saw the smashed chariots wash up onto the shore of the Red Sea. The cross is the chief weapon of defeated death, and, during the triumphant procession of the Resurrection, God drags it up to heaven in display, ineffectual, its rugged arms limp.

God's endorsement of Jesus does not make suffering good; God, by endorsing Jesus, is rejecting the human solution. The human solution was to get rid of him—but God raises him from the dead with power. The human view was of one now cursed, defiled, ejected from human community—but God makes the spirit of Jesus, moving now through the whole world, a source of blessing, healing, reconciliation. The human solution was to impose divisive power for control—but God laughs and pours out Jesus' Spirit into everyone, so we all call on one God as our parent now, without intermediaries, without divisions, without fear. Without fear, because the gift of the Spirit is to know that, if God is our parent, then this world God made is our home.

We know, though, that the cross means more than the defeat of death; it is also somehow the source of life. This paradox was first struck by Paul. Paul never claimed Christ's power was, somehow, in spite of the cross, or

beyond the cross, or after the cross. Christ's power was known on the cross. Writing to the Christians in Corinth, our dear older brother Paul says, "Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are being called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God; for God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

How did Paul come to this message? I believe from Paul's sense of his own insufficiency: rejected and attacked by the Judaism that raised him, viewed with suspicion and without support by the original Christian community of Jerusalem, sick and disabled in Galatia, beaten and jailed in Philippi, hustled out of Thessalonika in the middle of the night to avoid a riot, dismissed and lonely in Athens, uncertain and weak in Corinth, under long-term house-arrest in Caesarea and Rome. Self-review would lead him to a sense of his brokenness.

If he asked himself who he was, how he appeared to others, he would have to say—as he says in his letters—"I am a man, once persecuting, now persecuted, at best controversial, at worst a troublemaker, the aborted fetus, fearful and weak." If he then asked himself why his Gospel was so problematic, what others were hearing as his message, he would have to say—as he says in his letters—"I proclaim a man put to death as a political criminal, one who, because executed, has become a defilement and a sign of sin to his own people, and one who, because executed, has become suspect to the establishment." A defeated messiah, a suppressed and exterminated teacher, is all the outsiders can see. As a proclamation, this is nonsense; as marketing, this is lunacy; as an appeal for followers, this is suicidal. Would Jews align themselves with an already defeated Messiah? Would Gentiles

follow a teacher recently exterminated as radical and subversive? The message is as unlikely and catastrophic as Paul is; and the message is about the unlikely and catastrophic Jesus. But the proclamation is not about what is seen by those who reject it; it is about what is seen by those who embrace it, who live it as their own life.

Paul does not talk about Jesus as a divine being, who lays down his life and takes it up again. The risen Christ that appeared to him is the one he was persecuting in his followers, the one Paul continued to crucify. What changed Paul forever was coming to know this same suppressed rebel directly as exalted by God—not only raised from the dead, but still present and potent among his followers. What changed Paul forever was coming to know the risen Christ as present and potent to him and in him as he himself came to be persecuted.

Paul saw that his brokenness was his message; he himself had been raised up from his own annihilating rage and brought back to life from his own self-destructiveness. The power of God to overcome death, even our own death-wish, Paul had lived out in his own conversion. That was what he could show others: he was as crucified as Jesus had been. Though they had gotten there by opposite paths, Paul and Jesus had both been broken by the Law, defeated by sin, tumbled into death: from a human angle of vision, they were both a vast devastation. What mattered to Paul was not that God would, at a *later* time, vindicate him and raise him up from the dead. What mattered to Paul was that, *at this very moment*, his incapacity, his weakness, his foolishness, his helplessness, made it clear that the only power working in him was God's. Paul's reliance on the Risen Christ to overcome his dereliction was as total as Jesus' surrender to God had been on the cross. And just as God had raised Jesus from the dead, so the Risen Christ had

raised Paul from a dedication to death, and now both were sustained by the presence in them of this power greater than their own.

Jesus' resurrected life now flows in Paul: without it, nothing but bitterness and vindictiveness; with it, the power of God and the wisdom of God. Paul's failure becomes his message. "We have this treasure in earthen vessels," he says, "so the surpassing power may be of God and not from us." Paul calls himself crucified, so the life he lives will be recognized as Christ's. He writes to the Corinthians, "We are . . . always carrying in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our bodies as well. For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh."

Jesus' presence of is known in his effects on people's lives, as in the days of Jesus' earthly ministry. Over and over, Paul points to results, not in his own life, but in the life of those who know him. He is a weak thing, with a thorn in his side, but he sees that those who believe what he proclaims receive the Spirit and the Spirit's gifts of healing and wisdom and praise.

The Living Crucified One is the point. We are not waiting for death to be defeated. Death is shown to have no power in this very moment. Christ's Risen Life is what is acting, even as we go down to the grave. This is the crucial point for Paul. What he proclaims is not that his ministry will be vindicated later, but that already, knowing he is wounded and fallible, he can see that God works in him and through him. Just as he is crucified with Christ, so Christ lives in him. Human loss and divine gift are simultaneous in the one who is rooted in God. When my abjection and defeat become reliance on God, human division and dualism are resolved forever, because all my striving and anxiety are over. My sense of being an enemy of God, a misfit in the cosmos, a stranger to my kindred, and my grim shame-soggy

efforts to overcome and compensate for this alienation—all of which could be used as proof that I *am* rejected and irreconcilable and beyond repair—become, when I admit I am nothing else and unable to repair the breach on my own, my own crucifixion with Christ; and as I identify with him in his death, says Paul, I find that he identifies with me in his life. There is no longer any separation if I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. I remain what I was, but I am not my own anymore. And if Christ lives in my broken self, then I become myself the sign that the cross itself is glorious.

For Paul, even the Church, persecuted and in constant danger, divided and tense and competitive, was the place where love was tested and tried and proven true. The Church is, in other words, the sign of the crucified and living Christ. The Church also could not love on its own power, but only as the Spirit bestowed that greatest gift: the unnatural love for someone not like us. The fallibility of human love in the congregation, coupled with the fact that, nevertheless, it eats the same flesh and drinks the same blood and therefore acts out love in spite of itself, makes the Church the true sign, not of human solutions, but of the presence of *God's* reconciling power.

So the cross matters, first, because it shows that God has not chosen the way of human power, but exalted one rejected and defeated, not because God prefers suffering, but because human power is to be removed from our calculations of how to obtain God's favor; and second, because in rejection, defeat, illness, loss, even death, we can find that a deeper Life meets us when our sense of self is in ruins, and because we have ended up where there is no recourse but surrender, we find that this Life is what raises us up, and that, in spite of our own inability to be on our own side, nevertheless we stand and walk by God's grace, journeying into the day when our suffering will be no more than glorious scars and when we will praise God forever.