

St John's Church, Wimbledon, London SW19
Sung Eucharist on the Second Sunday of Lent
The Revd George Bush, Rector of St Mary-le-Bow
Sunday 25th February 2018

A friend of mine lived until lately at Bamburgh on the Northumberland coast – a place of astonishing beauty (and with some great pubs) and surely one of the few genuinely seasonal places in the land left. He was actually the vicar and was consulted about the state of the war memorial which, lying at the base of the castle, was suffering considerably from the sea air. You would think nothing much of it, though it is a crucifix of good design and with very well lettered names of the war dead. But the proposal had emerged that the memorial was beyond repair and would best be replaced by a simple stone cross without a figure of the dead Christ which was much more difficult to keep in good condition.

You will be familiar on your travels with wayside crucifixes in more obviously Catholic domains; if there are such things here, ten to one they are war memorials. One of the striking things that happened in popular spirituality in and after the First World War was that people, for all that in other respects they were Protestant in culture, began to see in the undeserved and barbarous suffering of the trenches, an equivalence with the silent courage of Jesus on the cross. The life of the tommy, limited in time and in freedom was seen as a kind of passion; his death was in an odd way redemptive for the rest of the nation. The crucifix became a loved image once more.

In an earlier age Protestant edicts had declared the crucifix, displaying the dead body of the Lord to be idolatrous, whereas a plain cross was suggestive of the Resurrection. There is a Christian Conference Centre where some Northern Irish groups are unhappy about the cross on the wall of the dining room – as if that were short step to popery. A priest friend of mine insists that the crucifix is only half of the Gospel – but we lack a convincing image of the resurrection. I don't know whether you have an Easter Garden here for the coming Feast, but I hazard that it will not be as popular as the Crib of Bethlehem.

There was a famous cross set up in my street, Cheapside in the City; one of a sequence of twelve elaborate stone structures topped with crosses, erected by Edward 1 in memory of his much loved Queen, Eleanor of Castile and marking the nightly resting places of her body on its way from Lincolnshire to London. It was destroyed by Puritans in 1647; I would love to see it rebuilt, but it would play havoc with the traffic. This was the cross as a symbol of human love felt as an expression of the selflessness of Jesus. The marriage service of the Church of England presents the wedded state as reflecting the love between Christ and his Church; marriage by such ambition is tested by the symbol of the cross; can one live so much for someone else rather than oneself that one would die for the other? In this sense the cross is a sign of unconditionality.

Jesus cannot humanly have known that he would be required to carry a cross. Crucifixion was the barbaric favourite of the Romans and particularly deployed to discourage rebellion. If Jesus

had some likely enemies, they lay within the Hebrew establishment by reason of his criticism of their spiritual inflexibility and doubtless also their concentration of economic power which fleeced the poor. They did not have the power to crucify; only the Romans did. Perhaps by the time Mark's Gospel was set down 'Taking up the cross' had become a phrase hallowed among Christians, but this seems generally unlikely since Christians did not see symbolic value in the Cross – so shocking and degrading was it – and, as we know much preferred the image of a Good Shepherd, Jesus carrying the lost with care around his shoulders.

Certainly by Mark's time Christians knew that martyrdom was possible condition of following Jesus; there is an unconditional element in discipleship – it leads where it must. Many, perhaps most Coptic Christians have, in infancy a cross tattooed on the inside of their right arms. This is of course principally an act of devotion and of historic family feeling, but it has huge implications for witness and, as it transpires of martyrdom. The 21 Christians who were killed by Islamic State in 2015 in Syria – all of them construction workers were marked with the cross and all refused to reject Jesus Christ. They could not hide their identity because they were signed literally with the cross, but that identity was more than skin deep and they paid the price for the unconditionality of our faith. In a sense they truly carried the cross.

Each of us is also marked with the cross – branded, often in oil on the forehead at our baptism; invisible but wholly indelible. The Cross is often treated as a kind of theory – almost as an equation. The world was mired in sin and this could only be resolved by a kind of equivalent goodness and virtue which was bound to die. It can be even a tad cruder than that – as if we still inhabited a world of violence ritual sacrifice. Or the cross can be a symbol, evacuated of almost all meaning, but resonated like the cross of St George or the Red Cross an historic culture of power and privilege (the Church is not unconnected to that). But the Cross is really a process and a dynamic.

I have started to look around my house and to wonder how I acquired so much stuff and what on earth I'm going to do with it when the time comes significantly to downsize. We size up and acquire – not only things, but connections, obligations and objectives as part of the furnishing of our egos as life proceeds, with little sense that we might one day need to divest ourselves of them. It's not that they get in the way of themselves – though some may, but that as we go through life we discover that detachment is at least as much a part of living as acquisition. This is the way of the Cross, for loss instructs our souls more than gain and it was the loss of himself as the Christ that showed Jesus as the Christ.