

The Cross and the Crucifix

Earlier this year I was in a church with a beautiful medieval Rood Screen, above which, resting on the screen, a large crucified Christ, flanked by a sorrowing Mary and John, had been re-erected in the twentieth century. Many screens survive, separating nave from chancel, and were originally topped by either a cross or a crucifix (with or without Mary and John on either side) – hence the name ‘Rood Screen’, rood being the Norman respelling of *rōd*, the Anglo-Saxon word for ‘cross’. The Norman scribes indicated that it was pronounced with a long vowel by writing the letter twice. Rood Screens were not usually taken down at the Reformation, but any images on their lower panels were covered up or scraped off, and the large cross or crucifix resting on it, which gave the screen its name, was taken down. ‘Cross’ and ‘crucifix’ are not, I must emphasise, interchangeable terms, despite the sloppy usage of modern journalists! It is not a crucifix unless it has the figure of Christ on it, the word coming from the Latin meaning ‘fixed to the cross’.

A plain wooden cross replicates what the Romans used to execute common criminals, and so at one level it draws attention to the human suffering of Christ. At the same time, however, being without a body, in the Christian context it points to the Resurrection, the death transcended. By contrast, highly decorated crosses, made of precious metals and adorned with jewels, still without a body, give primary focus to the transcendent — the preciousness symbolising the glory of what the cross stands for in the context of the faith. More directly, this understanding may be displayed by having the symbols of the four evangelists at the end of each of the four arms of the cross, and the Paschal Lamb of the Resurrection, with his flag, at the crossing. In such crosses, the Resurrection is visually present at the centre, as is the teaching of the church through the allusion to the Gospels, from which the understanding of Christ’s sacrifice is drawn. Yet, at the same time, it is a cross, and so always contains within itself suffering and death.

Crucifixes respond to the paradox of suffering and triumph rather differently. Some, of course, portray to a gruesome degree the suffering of the *homo crucifixus*, the man fixed to the cross. But others, while giving the suffering prominence through the twisted body and the wounds, point to transcendent glory through the precious metals from which the crucifix is made: the visual suffering, while being strongly present, is at the same time transformed to precious treasure, thus symbolically (and in a sense actually) making a statement of theological meaning. In fact, the graphic representation of Christ crucified, with which we are so familiar, really only begins in western art in the tenth century and then intensifies greatly in the centuries that follow. Before that, it was quite common to represent Christ on the cross with straight arms, straight body, sometimes even an actual crown (rather than a crown of thorns) and with the wounds not at all emphasised. In these depictions, we see Christ ‘reigning from the tree’. It is this triumphal concept that is captured in some of the older Easter hymns, written originally in Latin. We see it perhaps most clearly in the great hymn by the sixth century bishop and poet Venantius Fortunatus, which we know in translation as ‘The royal banners forward go’. Have a good look at the words when you sing it this Easter-tide.

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Professor Joyce Hill is Emeritus Professor of Medieval Literature at the University of Leeds