

Holy Cross, an alternative view by Rev'd Canon Vanda Perrett

Holy Cross day is not one that is often remembered in churches. There was some disquiet in the theological circles that only giving the cross a focus on Good Friday was wrong, especially when there are several people who do not manage to get to church on Good Friday. (Due to work and health, but some by choice too.) Additionally, sometimes Good Friday was getting merged with Maundy Thursday and so the focus was on betrayal more than the cross. Hence the evolution of this day. Celebrated on September 14th, Holy Cross day is a day which honours and commemorates the sacrifice that Jesus Christ made on the cross for our salvation. This holiday is also known as "The Triumph of the Cross" in the Roman Catholic Church and as the "Exaltation of the Holy Cross" in the eastern church.

Christian tradition says that the True Cross was discovered in 326 by Saint Helena, the mother of Constantine Emperor of Rome, during a pilgrimage she made to Jerusalem. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre was then built at the site of the discovery, by order of Helena and Constantine. The church was dedicated nine years later and kept a portion of the cross. One-third remained in Jerusalem, one-third was brought to Rome and one-third was taken to Constantinople.

The date of the feast marks the dedication of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in 335. This was a two-day festival: although the actual consecration of the church was on September 13 (for us in church this Sunday it is TODAY!), the cross itself was brought outside the church on September 14 so that the clergy and faithful could pray before the True Cross, and all could come forward to venerate it.

The faithful would (and still do in some places) come forward and make two prostrations (by kneeling or sometimes lying on the floor with outstretched arms), then make the sign of the cross on themselves, and kiss the feet of Christ on the cross, and then make a third prostration. After this, they will often receive a blessing from

the priest and bow towards their fellow worshippers on each side of the church.

Occasionally, this day will be called Holy Rood Day. Living at Land's End we cannot ignore the Rood with the example of the Rood Screen in St Buryan and imagine those who would have some to prostrate themselves and venerate the cross here!

It does seem weird to say we are celebrating a means of execution. After all it is argued we do not have a Gas Chamber, Guillotine or Electric Chair day! This line of thinking ignores the reality that the cross is both death and life, a punishment and atonement. And we are remembering the murder of the Son of God. While any means of execution is abhorrent, in the case of the cross the means of death was also the means to life and this dichotomy challenges us to think about life, death, faith and God more deeply, and to question what we learn about faith too.

However, I am sure that you have several crosses in your home. Some made of silver or gold and on pendants or earrings. Some carved in wood, or forged in metal, or casted in pottery, some cross stitched in embroidery silk or wool, some created in glass and on canvas or paper, and of course those carved in stone like those around our area with a Celtic design. Crosses are big sellers in the Christian world! How often is a baptised person or confirmation candidate or ordinand given a cross to mark their special day?

Not only are there several mediums in which crosses are created, but we have become very imaginative in the designs of the cross. Again think of your home, the empty cross, the crucifix, the one covered in plants, or flowers, the one with the image of Christ painted on it, the one like the Gomez cross with images of our lives painted or etched on it. Then there is the shape ... we can go on. So many ways of creating an image.

I wonder why we strive to make the simple cross something that is pretty? Why might we want to disguise the cross, or worse add to it, as if anything we could create as a cross or on a cross could make it more effective or beautiful? I think that we need to try to make the cross something we can handle, something we can domesticate. The immensity of God's love spilled out on the cross is just overwhelming, the darkness of humankind who can try to kill God is too much for us.

The cross holds the pain and hope of the world. It is too big for us to hold in our heads or hands. The cross reminds us of the depth of horror we can sink into and the heights of Jesus' servanthood, his willing sacrifice that is the cause of our hope, our life, our future.

Perhaps on this Holy Cross day you might find some time to stop, and remember the cross as the instrument of torture, the place of the death of our Lord. Perhaps in looking straight at the pain and passion of the cross you might be able to understand a little more deeply the depth of God's love for you, and realise the cross that is best created, decorated and loved is the one on which Love laid out his Life and allowed the heartbeat of the heavens to cease that we might understand how very precious we are, enough to die for, and to raise from the dead that hope can spring again.