

Reflection and Prayers for Holy Cross day

Each week I have tried to offer something either from my own thoughts or from someone who has offered a way to think about the scriptures that is helpful. Each Sunday there is a different reflection in church so that I can keep things fresh for those attending worship. This week the writing comes from a series of lectures on baptism and confirmation, author known to God.

Reference

Church of England (1662) *Book of Common Prayer*.

The Ministration of Public Baptism of Infants to be used in the church.

Available: <http://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-worship/worship/book-of-common-prayer/public-baptism-of-infants.aspx> (Accessed 29 August 2020) (Internet).

Holy Faith – helping people on their Christian Journey Unpopular Christianity
And Jesus said to them all, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me" (NRSV, Luke 9:23)

Holy Cross Day is a feast which was originally instituted to commemorate the dedication of the first Church of the Holy Sepulchre on September 14th 335 AD, upon the site of the Saviour's Crucifixion. But the feast also serves to recall the essential *character* of the Christian religion by reminding us of the Cross which is its specific symbol.

We are accustomed to crosses and crucifixes. But in Christ's day there were no crucifixes, only crucifixions. Public crucifixion was an everyday punishment for dangerous criminals; and so, for a cross to be placed on God's altar *then*, would have caused the same feelings of revulsion that we should experience today if we saw on our altars a model of a gallows.

The crucifixion of a man is a hideous sight and the cross, the gallows of the ancient world, would still be a horrible thing were it not for the fact that in his immeasurable love, God himself was impaled on one to save your soul and mine. Thus the specific symbol of the Christian Faith is the reverse of comfortable, and it is not surprising that the Christian Faith itself when fully and faithfully presented will always be unpopular. How could it be otherwise when its Divine Founder, Jesus Christ, was himself so unpopular?

His fellow villagers at Nazareth resented him and were thankful to see the back of him. The members of the Jewish Government hated him because, so far

from toeing the official line, he attacked their avarice and dishonesty and love of power. The city mob yelled for his crucifixion because they were sick of hearing him preach about the renunciation of self and the Kingdom of God, when the only Kingdom that appealed to them was national independence under which they would never have had it so good.

They did not object when Jesus was the Great Healer, curing their sick and diseased, though even that roused official opposition and envy. No, it was Jesus the King and Judge, the denouncer of human sins, who roused their hostility and malice; and in the end it was human sin that crucified him – not against his will.

For the Crucifixion was what his mission to this sinful world cost him; it was the *price* which in his love he willingly paid for coming down from Heaven for us men and for our salvation. So he declared, "...I lay down my life for the sheep... No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord" (NRSV, John 10:15,18).

There is every reason, therefore, why the Christian religion, when presented fairly and squarely, should be unpopular today. For God's *love* for *us* is inseparable from God's *hatred* of our *sins* – and no one takes kindly to *that* except those who, out of love for God, are themselves trying to hate their sins, and hating them to make a wholly new start in their thinking and in their living. For Christ demands *not* that a person should be a *better* person but that he or she should be a *new* person altogether; not an improvement on his or her old self but a true and lifelike imitation of *Christ*.

I remember a remark which a garage proprietor once made to me. "I am reasonably honest", he said. Christ has no use whatsoever for such an attitude. Reasonably honest means reasonably *dishonest*; reasonably truthful means reasonably *untruthful*; reasonably forgiving means reasonably *unforgiving*. In short, such an attitude means following Christ *only* when it happens to *suit* one to do so. *That* is not what Christ means by his call, "Follow me".

Thus, human nature being what it is, the salvation which Christ died on the Cross to *obtain* for us, fails to find favour with any except a small minority. It is no accident, therefore, that what keeps people from fully embracing the Christian religion, is not that they are doubtful about such truths as Our Lord's Divinity and Resurrection, but rather that they do not want to change their

mental attitude and their way of life. One is either like the Pharisee in the parable and feels in no need of salvation; or else, like the tax collector in the same parable, takes the first firm step in accepting the Christian religion – and that step is penitence: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” (NRSV, Luke 18:13).

The plain truth is that, unless a person’s *heart* has been touched by God, sins – whether respectable or otherwise – are vastly more attractive than Christ-likeness. No wonder that so many hesitate for years, perhaps for ever, before embracing the Christian religion when, to *do* so, sincerely and wholeheartedly, means trying to be a new kind of person.

And this requires making a determined and persistent effort to say goodbye to grudges, to send all vile thoughts packing as soon as they present themselves, to curb evil temper and evil speaking, and in penitence to seek God’s forgiveness for these and every other moral failure; and so “to follow the example of our Saviour Christ, and to be made like unto him...”.

And being made like him means sharing his attitude of goodwill towards all, and bringing forth in one’s own thinking and life the fruit of his own character – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. It means being the sort of person that St Paul described when he said, “...once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light – for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true” (NRSV, Ephesians 5:8,9). In a word, it means no longer to be the plaything of one’s lower nature, but to do and be what the all-holy God requires, and to dedicate to him a purified soul and a Christ-like life.

That is the calling of every Christian, for as Our Blessed Lord himself has told us, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (NRSV, Luke 9:23).