

The Cross as a Symbol of **IDENTITY & BELONGING**

The Cross is not a story of doom and gloom; the cross is the story of victory of life over death!

We have been examining symbols of the cross, first as a symbol of our sin, then as a symbol of God's covenant (His faithfulness). Last Sunday we looked at the Cross as a symbol of God's grace. Symbols are very powerful statements of identity. McDonald's golden arches of welcome, Nike's "tick-mark", Virgin Media's infinity mark (an "8" on its side), each symbol conveys an intended meaning along with the values of the business.

Today we examine the cross as a **symbol of identity and belonging**.

The cross is everywhere, in churches, on churches, in graveyards, on gravestones, as jewellery, on buildings, in art, everywhere. Even the Angel of the North is in the shape of a cross!

Some think, the cross is an absurd, if not inappropriate symbol for the Christian message: it is associated with death, and a horrible death at that too! A modern equivalent of the horrible death symbolised by the cross would be the dreaded electric chair! Would it be appropriate then, for us to "modernise" and have an electric chair at the front of the church? Will the electric chair convey the same message, same values as does the cross? I am sure we would seriously reconsider our association and allegiance to a religion and a faith whose symbol was the electric chair! I wonder how many would want to come to church if ever, to look at an electric chair!

If our view of the cross is that it tells the world, *Look what you did to our leader, God's Son*, we would indeed have a very sad story to tell, the story of a religious leader who promised heaven on earth, killed by fanatical religious leaders who thought He was corrupting their carefully honed message and carefully cultivated way of life.

But this is far from the truth! The cross has a very different story to tell!

Strange as it may sound, the cross is the crowning moment of our faith. It is the public face of our history we show the world. It is the climax of human history, the penultimate "stop" which signals the beginning of the end, the first page of the final chapter.

Thirty some years before the cross on which Jesus died, the cradle (manger) might have been an appropriate symbol of our faith. Many who believed that the child born to Mary and Joseph was indeed the promised Messiah, would have considered the cradle where the miracle took place, of God who came to us, as one of us, to be revered and represent our faith in God's plans being accomplished.

Think of it, *in* the cradle **and** *on* the cross, the impossible happened! In the cradle, the Creator becomes His created, God comes to us as a human in the person of His Son, and on the cross God, through the person of His Son Jesus, defeats the barrier which separates us from Him, the obstruction which is death.

Should the cradle then, be the symbol of our faith? Starting our story at the cradle would be like beginning the story of Jack and the Beanstalk, when Jack arrived at the top of the beanstalk. This would unfortunately, leave us with several unanswered questions: How and why did he get there? Was he there by accident, or did he have a plan?

If we are going back in time, let's go to the beginning of time, to the dawn of a new and unique creation, purpose-built by God for the new form of life He created: a man and a woman, not just **any** man and woman, but a man and woman created ***in His image***. They enjoyed God's perfect creation for some time, we don't know for how long, until the moment when God's adversary placed the seed of doubt in the integrity of God (*Did God really say...?*), followed by lies and falsehood about the intentions of God (*Surely God knows you will not die!*). This lie, introduced death into God's perfect creation; at this very point of time in human

history, God decided the cross was necessary to break the bondage of death.

All of human history after this disastrous calamity in the garden has on the one hand, been a struggle to live life in obedience to God's perfect law, juxtaposed by the constant distraction of satan's deception and lies. All of human history thereafter, has been a struggle for Truth, to discern right from wrong, and distinguish good from evil.

Should the garden then be the perfect symbol of our faith? After all, the human race was born into a perfect garden, and the entire human race is waiting to return to the Eden that was lost.

Perhaps, we should have three symbols of our faith. When put together, they convey the complete story of our Redemption: the garden gifted to us, but spoilt by the wrong decision (sin), the cradle which welcomed God in the person of His Son to deal with sin, and the cross on which the victory over sin and death was won, which leads us back to garden which awaits us.

The Hebrew people narrate weekly (at the Shabbat dinner), a shared story of deliverance and emancipation from slavery in Egypt, by the mighty hand of God, into a land where they would live in peace, with God as their king. God's purpose for this community of the saved, was to be a witness to all around them, the reality of God's kingdom on earth. As generations multiplied and covered the earth, they would bless all people and God's kingdom would grow; but sadly, this community of the saved, kept their shared story to themselves, and still do.

Jesus comes as fulfilment of their shared story of deliverance. The symbols of deliverance celebrated by the Hebrew people, the elaborate elements of the meal, the bread and the wine, had taken a meaning of its own and distorted God's intention. The people were blinded to God clothed in human flesh symbolised in the bread, which had to be broken!

The people were also blinded to the promise of God symbolised in the wine, waiting to be matured until the perfect time for the promise of God to be fulfilled!

So, at His last Passover meal, Jesus unpacks the shared story of the Hebrew people for us, to be **our** shared story too.

The bread and wine, symbolising the humanity of God in Christ, and the promise of God awaiting its perfect time, is the story which unites us, brings us together.

But, the symbols of bread and wine are not an end in itself. The bread and wine are an invitation to the dining table, to share a meal as a family. The head of the family is Christ Himself, and the provider of everything on the table is God Himself. At this table, we rejoice and delight and are ecstatic about the cross **through which** Jesus defeated death.

Those who talk about "the cross on which Jesus died" might as well replace the cross with the electric chair which represents death, termination, loss of life. They might as well narrate the story about a failed *coup d'état* which went horribly wrong, during which the leader of the *coup* was killed.

The empty cross is the symbol of victory won over death. This is our identity. We are a people who belong to Eternal and Almighty God, who share a common story of deliverance from eternal death to eternal life, a people who share a common story of being transformed (changed) by the work of God, through His Son on the cross, for the whole world to see, transformed (changed from inside, out) to live in the Kingdom of God, here and now.

Will we take up this challenge during Lent this year, to be a people transformed by the promise of God on the cross? If we do, we have one, big, joyous story to tell! **AMEN.**