

Wearing a Cross

Year B, Proper 20 – Daughters of the King

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, September 20, 2015

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

For the last several months, a group of women from this Parish have been working and studying and, most of all, praying, preparing for this day when they would make their promises and vows as members of the Order of the Daughters of the King, and collectively, establish the St. Agnes Chapter of that Order right here at St. Paul's. We will have the opportunity to hear more about what that means in just a few minutes, but one prominent feature of their service is the small silver cross presented to each Daughter at her admission to the Order, a cross that each Daughter promises to wear faithfully as a constant reminder, to herself *and* to all who see it, of our Lord's words that we are to, take up our cross and follow him. So I thought it might be appropriate this morning to take a few moments to remind us all again about that cross that we are called to bear.

Through the centuries, the cross has always been a very special symbol for most Christians. At its simplest it's just a vertical line with a horizontal one crossing it. Through the ages, that simple emblem has come to be seen as a symbol for healing, as a sign of peace, as a rallying point for people of faith. But over the centuries, the Cross has also adorned the shields and tunics of soldiers as they rode into battle. And it has been used to concentrate wealth and power in a few not-so-clean hands. And it has been used to legitimize the subjugation of individual human beings and whole nations. The cross was often the first thing native peoples saw as their homes became someone else's land. And the cross was often the last thing that pagans in the 4th century, Muslims in the 10th, and "heretics" in the 16th saw before they were dispatched from this world into the next. I don't think that's what Jesus had in mind when he said in this morning's Gospel that, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

In these last few decades, it seems, the Cross has continued to be an omnipresent cultural and fashion phenomenon. Pick up any magazine today and you will no doubt see the cross accessorizing the young and the beautiful modeling the latest in high fashion. Movie stars and mavens of high finance dangle the cross from their necks or their ears. For many Christians, of course, the Cross is *more* than a fashion accessory – it is a reminder, to themselves and to others, of who they are and, more importantly, *whose* they are. But some Christians in our day have turned the cross into a badge of exclusive right and privilege, for which the bearer claims full authority of interpretation. And lest you think you know exactly who I'm talking about, let me hasten to point out that there are such folks on *both* ends of any debate you'd like to consider, political *or* theological. I suspect James might have recognized *all* those displays of the cross for exactly the weapons are meant to be, when he said in this morning's Epistle that, "the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy."

Every year, usually during Lent or Holy Week, there's at least one magazine photo or webpage or YouTube clip of some guy walking through some street somewhere carrying a large cross on his back. A couple of years back, I saw a news piece featuring a guy making some sort of cross-country trek dragging a cross, though he had installed a small wheel at the base to make it a bit easier. (Maybe the Romans should have thought of that.) All this is meant as pious reflection, and I have no doubt at all about the sincerity and devotion of those taking on such tasks. But do you really think that *any* of it what Jesus meant when he said that we should take up our cross and follow him?

The *problem* is that when we hear that phrase, "Take up your cross and follow me," we do not see the cross in the same way as the crowd heard it Jesus spoke it. Colored with the blazing light of the Resurrection, we hold the cross as a symbol of hope, a symbol of victory, a symbol of *life*. But in the

world of Jesus and his disciples, the world into which Jesus spoke the words of this morning's Gospel lesson, the cross meant something else indeed. In their world, the cross was not a symbol of hope, but a symbol of anguish and despair. The cross was not a symbol of victory, but a symbol of tyranny and defeat. The cross was not a symbol of life, but a symbol of torture and *death*. When Jesus said, "Take up your cross and follow me," he was saying, "Come with me... and die."

Real crosses, you see, are not made of wood or metal, they are made of flesh and blood. The cross of true discipleship, the *real* cross borne for us as each of the Daughters bears us in daily prayer, is living day by day a life of faithful obedience to the King of kings, regardless of cost, regardless of loss. The cross of some lives is intricately worked, heavy with gold, and crusted with precious stones. The cross of some lives is knurled and twisted and stained with sweat or tears or even blood. The cross of some lives is simple and quiet and seldom even noticed. But the cross of *every* life lived for Christ bears witness to Christ's *own* redeeming love in and for a world that is utterly *lost* without him. The Cross of Christ stands at the center of all that we have, all that we do, all that we *are*. By *that* Cross we are cleansed from the stain of sin. With that Cross we are sealed in baptism as Christ's own *forever*. In that Cross we are transformed into children of our heavenly Father – and followers of Jesus Christ.

We do not carry that Cross in order to persecute or to exclude. We do not lift that Cross to glorify ourselves. Rather, we lift the Cross as a symbol that though the grace of God is free, it is certainly *not* cheap. Those among us who we will celebrate here in a moment will faithfully wear the cross of the Order of the Daughters of the King to remind themselves, and to remind us, that the cost of our redemption was high indeed, and that following the Christ who bore his cross for us – is just as costly. We proclaim the Cross as an emblem of Christ's love for all of us, as an emblem of Christ's love for *each* of us. In the words of the old hymn that is part of every celebration of the Daughters of the King, let us always, "Lift *high* the cross, the love of Christ proclaim, 'til all the world adore his sacred name!"