

Last night we venerated the Precious and Life-giving Cross which we brought from the side altar before the service to the main altar on a tray of basil and flowers and laid it there so that we could look through the Cross to the Gospel which is laid upright as at the unfolding of the antimins in the Divine Liturgy. The symbolism should not be lost on us, namely that we have to look through our own cross to see Christ in the Gospel Book through a candle placed in front. At the end of the Mattins service during the Great Doxology the Cross is placed on the head of the priest and brought to the centre of the church where it is venerated by those present with three prostrations and a kiss before the last of the three. We all have an opportunity to venerate it in the centre of the church as we celebrate the feast.

The image of the Cross surprisingly does not appear in the early history of the Church, where the fish was the generally accepted symbol. The early Christians, who had to worship and communicate with each other secretly for fear of capture, torture and execution, developed a highly intricate and sophisticated communication code, as can be seen from the catacombs. The fish, *ichthys*, was so important because its individual letters in Greek represent the phrase 'Jesus Christ Son of God Saviour'. The cross really makes its impact when the Roman Empire became Christianised under Constantine, and according to tradition, his mother Helena, went in search of and found the true Cross in the Holy Land.

Today's Gospel from Mark speaks of losing our life in order to save it, of giving our life for Christ and the Gospel in order to save it and of denying oneself and taking up the cross manfully. But more importantly, Christ speaks of our soul being the most important thing that a person has. It is the supreme treasure which man has, which he can fill as he wishes, with good and with evil. "What can a man give in exchange for his soul?" asks Jesus in today's Gospel and "What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?" It is the most precious thing we have, which we can sell for earthly possessions, for power, for satisfaction of our human desires. And it is the place in us where God wishes to dwell, where the depth of dwelling is inexhaustible, and where we find that treasure which has no earthly price, of discovering God and ourselves, intimately and inextricably bound together. These are the so-called streams of living water of which Christ speaks to the adulterous woman at the well and which satisfy our deepest longings and cause us to thirst.

The path of experiencing this is to take up our cross boldly and not deny Christ, even in our moments of greatest failure, and it is salutary to remember that St Peter, the head of the Church, denied Christ three times. This denial of self and willingness to suffer with Christ is spoken of much in the Epistles. St Paul writes to Timothy, "Take your share of suffering as a good soldier of Jesus Christ". And later he urges him to play by the rules i.e. not to try to avoid suffering when it is clearly meant for him. St James goes even further and says that these trials and sufferings should be a source of joy for us because our perseverance in the face of them will bring us to maturity, which God desires for each of us and that they will disappear at the appropriate time. How hard that is for us and to follow the words of St Peter in the same vein. "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his footsteps. When they hurled their insults at him he did not retaliate: when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead he entrusted himself to Him who judges justly". And of course, it takes real wisdom and the prompting of the Holy Spirit to know when to speak and when to keep silent in the face of baseless criticism and clear victimisation.

But there is an interesting verse at the end of today's pericope, or section of the Gospel appointed for the reading from St Mark. "Truly I tell you there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Kingdom of God come with power." Now on a very simple and cursory reading we might say that Christ was speaking of his resurrection to his audience and even of the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost upon the Apostles. But how does this verse relate to Christ's call to us to take up the cross, to give up our lives for his sake and follow in his footsteps? We know that the Apostles received power in the form of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. They received the strength to proclaim the word of God far and wide in the face of terrible

persecution and opposition. We know also that they were all martyred bar one, and one, Thomas, even as far away as India. Few of us realistically will be asked to do that but we will all be asked to suffer and through that suffering we will all see the Kingdom of God come with power communally and individually. It seems that the ability to endure, to bear our insults humbly, to suffer somehow is the key to receiving power.

Now power through humility is something that this generation has lost its hope in as a universal law. There is absolutely no respect for or admiration of the virtue of humility these days. The humble man is dismissed as a weak and spineless person, a loser, to use modern parlance with a personality defect. We are told to be assertive, to be uncompromisingly ambitious, to be endlessly competitive, if necessary to lie or at least to massage the truth in order to secure what we want and never to give up, like a dog with a bone. There is a side to this which is true also in the spiritual life that we should never give up. Yet in the service of proskomidia which takes place before the beginning of the Liturgy when the priest prepares the communion with prayers to all the Apostles, Prophets, Martyrs and Saints of the Church beginning with Christ himself, the Mother of God and John the Baptist, he utters the words. "As a sheep led to the slaughter or as a blameless Lamb before its shearers is dumb so He opens his mouth. In his humiliation justice is denied him... For his life is taken up from earth. "These are familiar words of the prophet Isaiah. In all this humility of Christ is emphasised as a precondition to power, a humility which can tell Peter not to act like Satan and to deflect him from his preordained path to death on a cross and to the power of the Resurrection. We sing also in the Liturgy that "the meek shall inherit the earth".

Now if this is a universal law of the Kingdom, what power can we and do we experience and hope for in spiritual and worldly terms in the world, in the Church and in ourselves? At the individual level we certainly experience transfiguration or healing. The final words of the priest before giving communion are clear: the sacrament is given for 'healing of soul and body'. It is for breaking down of those barriers within ourselves which consciously or unconsciously prevent us from moving into the greater freedom of the Kingdom of Heaven and which are sins against each other, the Church. It is for loosening of the grip of those faults which from a human point of view seem ineradicable. It is for a clarity of vision which enables us to cut through what is meaningless and unhelpful in our lives and focus like Mary on the 'one thing needful'. There is nothing like suffering to concentrate the mind. And if it brings us closer to God and to an understanding of ourselves, it will surely in some way affect those with us in the Church and the world in a truly transfiguring way. And that is perhaps the most important thing of all. By suffering for Christ we bring to the world our own albeit limited power of healing it and drawing it towards the love of God, where it is destined to be, where Christ will be 'all in all' in the words of St Paul.

Today's Gospel promises each of us power as a result of our taking up our cross and entering into Christ's suffering. May this visitation by God be seen by all and give cause for thanks and joy in us, in the Church and in the world to the greater glory of God. Amen. *Oxford 11th March 2018*