

Homily for Good Friday 2013

You don't often notice it or maybe even think about it much, but when you stand outside our Church and look up to where the new Church is hopefully going to be built, you are in fact looking up a hill. Admittedly it isn't a very steep hill but it is nevertheless a hill and at the top of this small incline we are intending to build our new Church with its beautiful rotund tower a top of which we will place a cross. I mention this because I think today of all days we should fix the cross in our minds and make it a point of reflection as we are challenged by the meaning of that cross on the hill of Calvary, challenged by what our response to it should be and exactly what that means for us and for our community. I want us to think about what strikes us when we contemplate what we are hoping to do over this next year, as hopefully our ambitions are realised. Why for instance put a cross on the top of the tower rather than say an image or a symbol of the resurrection?

If we want to express the love of God and offer his hope for the world here in this neighbourhood, why advertise it with a symbol of death? As a society we have essentially lost our religious literacy, and it is something we need to recover if we are to educate and present our communities with an understanding of faith that is tangible and of value to them. The cross has actually become a symbol which is very much taken for granted and the impact of its image holds nothing of the horror it once did for Christians. But we put it up front as it were, because the cross and the death which it represents, speaks a language that is necessary and vital if we are to understand the language of resurrection, and so before we can come to understand the resurrection and speak about it meaningfully and with relevance to people and their lives, and the events around which their lives revolve, we need to understand the cross.

When we speak of the resurrection we struggle to find appropriate words because the resurrection, in so many ways, transcends our human narrative, the cross and the story it tells does on the other hand seems much more accessible, we can visualise in it a path along which all human life is called to walk. The real question for us is how do we get from the cross to the resurrection and thus create the narrative which we want to unfold, so as to help other people bridge the gap.

Having just read the Passion we are reminded of all the twists and turns that took place and in each one of them we see how blame and guilt for the cross can be so easily allocated, and yet is the "allocation of blame" and the "allotting of guilt" the language which we want to offer as the basis for our faith? Is this the framework in which we are expected to present our hope? Think about the betrayal of Judas, or the denials of Peter, the prevarication and dithering of Pilate, the plotting of the Jewish leaders, the demands of the angry mob. Yes, we may well view them as reasons and explanations for what ultimately happened but none of these moments speak a language which really explains the "why" of the cross. I say this because the gospels tell us that Jesus had previously confronted angry mobs and passed through them

unharmful. They tell us that Jesus could argue and debate with the leaders of the people and silence them. We are also told that he moved quite openly among the Temple authorities without creating any necessity for betrayal and whilst it is true that the events of the passion have their own momentum, this sequence of human interventions is of itself not enough.

We are thereby trapped by our need to allocate human faults and failings to this terrible event as if these were the root causes at play and that the events contrive to deliver a moral to make us face up to our need to confront the horror of man's inhumanity to man. As if it's saying : this is how we are, and this is what we do. Yet we're hopeless at getting the point since the horror of innocent suffering still afflicts and shames us. So the cross is not simply about the human emotions which fill our minds when we gaze at it, otherwise allowing such suffering would be anathema and we would be doing so much more to alleviate it. No the language of the cross must encapsulate more than anger and shame more than pity and numbness. Yet when we offer our understanding of the cross as framed in the language of love, we find that people recoil with horror and the reason for this is because we have come to look at the cross with just our human eyes and while this is understandable it is also essentially flawed, because ultimately it simply delivers a distorted and warped view of God as a cold and monstrous figure who seems to be demanding the death of an innocent man and no-one wants to believe in a God like that. But the language of love is where the truth of the cross rests and to reach this truth we need to strip away all our efforts to explain it in terms of it just being a human act or deed and open our minds to the awesome reality of accepting the cross of Christ, as integral with the mystery of God's providential love for humanity.

To grasp the language of the cross, we need to come as close as we can to the person of Jesus, to seek his mind, to fathom his thoughts and to listen to his words in order that the symbol of the cross should find its true meaning not in a God of anger and indifference, but in a God who *so loves the world that he gave his only Son*. We have to realise something essential about Christ; *that he emptied himself taking the form of a slave* and this is something we can't do. We are unable to empty ourselves since there will always remain in us some portion of self need and self desire. The self emptying of Christ means that he is totally open to the will of God to the degree that even in the most fraught moment of his life during the agony in the garden when anguish filled his heart he was still able to say: *Your will be done*.

What is offered by Jesus on the cross is that ultimate part of our humanity that we are unable to let go of. When we realise this we see his whole life as culminating in this moment. The language of the cross is about the letting go of self into the will of God and the cost is everything we are, but the reward is the resurrection.

He who loves his life will lose it, but he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life...And when I am lifted up from the earth I will draw all people to myself.