

The Exaltation of the Cross (Sept. 14, 2014)

“Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim, ‘til all the world adore his sacred name.”

The exaltation of the cross! It’s one of those Christian paradoxes that are so much a part of what we believe, like Virgin birth and God-man. When Jesus was crucified it was very difficult – even impossible – for his followers to think in terms of exaltation. For them this was a shameful thing. They had put their faith, their trust in Him as their Messiah, and he was executed not just as any criminal, but the worst kind of criminal. A few years later Paul would say, “We preach Christ crucified, a scandal to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles.”

But it did not take long for the Christian community to recognize the importance of the cross in the history of salvation. They came to realize that the cross represented the culmination and epitome of what Jesus had come to do.

I like to look at the cross from three points of view, community, reconciliation, and love. What do I mean?

We have a tendency to privatize the cross and say that Jesus died for me and to save me from my sins. Well that’s true as far as it goes – but it doesn’t go far enough. In a little while in our profession of faith we will say, “For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven. . . . For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Palate.” In our opening prayer, we said “O God, who willed that your only begotten Son should undergo the Cross to save the human race. . . .” The human race. Not just me or you or any individual, not just Catholics or Christians, but also Jews and Muslims and Hindus and Buddhists and Taoists and everyone else in the world – the whole human race. It’s good for us to think about that. There are spiritual bonds that link us to everyone else in the world. We are all sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, whether we realize it or not. We are one great big community, and that simple but extraordinary fact should guide the way we think and feel about other people and how we deal with them no matter who they are.

Reconciliation. For there to be community there must first be

reconciliation. The fact of division in our world is only too obvious, and surely one of the main reasons why God became human was to put back together what had been shattered by sin. We say sometimes at the beginning of Mass, “You reconcile us to one another and to the Father” and “You heal the wounds of sin and division.” We only become true followers of Jesus Christ when we enter into that process of reconciliation. St. Paul puts it this way in his Second Letter to the Corinthians, “God has reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.” Jesus gives us the great example of forgiveness and reconciliation on the cross when he says, “Father, forgive them. They do not know what they are doing,” and to the repentant thief, “This day you will be with me in paradise.” God obviously wants us to be part of the ministry of reconciliation

And then there is love. Love, of course, is the most important of all. In our Gospel we heard Jesus say to Nicodemus, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that all who believe in him might have eternal life.” God so loved the world! And Jesus so loved the world that he was willing to die for it. No one has greater love than this: to give his life for his friends. When they asked him what was the greatest commandment, he said, “Love. Love God above all and your neighbor as yourself.” At the Last Supper Jesus said to his disciples, “Love one another as I have loved you.” Jesus literally loved us to death. Loving one another as he has loved us means being willing to die for one another as he did for us.

Community, reconciliation, love. Actually it works the other way around. First comes love, the most important of all: God’s love for us, our love for God and for one another. From that love comes forgiveness and reconciliation. And from reconciliation comes community. No wonder we celebrate the exaltation of the Cross!

Sometimes perhaps when we are praying before the cross, if we listen very carefully, we might actually hear God saying to us, “If ever you doubt my love for you, then look at this, the cross, and know that I love you very much.”