

Lent I

But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.

Imagine what it would be like if you could bring a first-century Roman citizen forward in time and let him walk around in our world.

To be sure, he would be astounded at the developments in technology.

On a cultural level, I'm not sure that much would surprise him.

The decadence, brutality, promiscuity, etc. would be fairly familiar to him.

But there is one thing about our culture that would most certainly elicit a reaction.

For us it is commonplace and scarcely noted. For for him, it would be astounding.

And that is the prominent and regular display the cross.

It is simply unfathomable to believe that anyone from that time and place would ever have thought that the cross would become such a ubiquitous icon of our culture.

You find it on chains around the neck, hung from earlobes, printed on t-shirts, on bumpers of cars, on hospital signs, planted in ditches on the side of the highway.

You see people trace its pattern in the air before mealtimes, when stepping up to bat, after scoring a touchdown, upon hearing a siren, and when warding off vampires.

Take your imaginary visitor to Arlington National Cemetery and watch his amazement at seeing endless rows of white crosses.

But nowhere is this iconic symbol more prominent or more ornately adorned than in and on Christian Churches.

They are made of brass and gold and silver, encrusted with jewels, embossed onto hymnals, printed in bulletins, suspended from ceilings and standing on altars.

You are even likely to see one or more with a lifeless body still hanging on it.

Up until that point, your Roman friend might have dismissed the similarity between our ubiquitous symbol and his experience by calling it an unrelated coincidence.

But once he sees the lifeless body hanging upon it, his astonishment will surely gush forth to ask: WHY?! HOW?! WHAT?!

"What, in the world would possess you to idolize the most horrible form of execution that we ever invented? Why would you want to show that thing in holy places?"

"We used it to deter criminals and to frighten enemies. How could you possibly make them out of chocolates and marshmallows or put them on hot cross buns?"

It is a fair question. And one that you should have an answer to--in case you are ever visited by a time-traveling Roman.

Of course, the short answer to the question is that Our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, was crucified and this is why we hold the cross in such esteem.

But even that begs the question. After all, a lot of other things happened to Jesus as well--both good and bad--and we don't find these icons plastered everywhere.

He was laid in a manger, anointed with spikenard, beaten with canes, fayed with scourges, and tied up with ropes and yet these are not symbolized everywhere.

But the crucifixion alone caused His death and it is His death that we have life.

That is what places the cross as front and center of the Christian faith.

But let me ask a further question: could Jesus' saving death been by any other means?

Can you conceive of a Christianity where Jesus died in the electric chair?

Or maybe where He died by stoning, firing squad or lethal injection?

How about one in which He died of cancer or accidental drowning?

Whether or not we could conceive of such a salvation story, God neither can nor does. Long before our Roman time-traveler ever invented crucifixion, God had prescribed it and described it.

Moses says, cursed is that man who hangs upon a tree.

David wrote Psalm 22, describing in first person what crucifixion is like.

Two days before His death, Jesus plainly stated: "*after two days is the Passover, and the Son of man is betrayed to be crucified.*" Mt 26:2

And when the sanhedrin sentenced Him to die, they told Pilate: "It is not lawful for us to put any man to death:" (That the saying of Jesus might be fulfilled, which he spake, signifying what death he should die.)

And when the Jewish authorities set about to execute Jesus, their instinct was to stone Him or run Him off a cliff. Crucifixion was the farthest thing from their minds.

But God was insistent on the crucifixion. Previous attempts to kill Him another way failed because they were not God's way.

And so, in the Creed, we confess not just that Jesus died, but that He was crucified. Crucifixion, therefore, is determined by God for a reason.

There is something so fitting and so unique about this method of execution that God would have it no other way.

This reason alone, should be enough for us to set the picture constantly before our eyes. For by it God would visually show us His way and truth and life.

And I maintain that the mystery of the crucifixion will never be fully plumbed.

That we can spend a lifetime looking at the crucifixion and still learn more from it.

And this is what moved Paul to say, "*I determined to know nothing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.*" 1 Corinthians 2:2

While truly miserable, crucifixion is not the most painful form of death.

But it is unique in other ways: The hands and feet are pierced.

The victim is lifted up above the earth. The wooden cross, etc.

But tonight let's focus only on the shape of the cross and leave it at that.

For the cross has two and only two parts and together these make up the whole.

There is a vertical beam and the horizontal cross piece.

The vertical beam indicates a heavenward direction--or an earthward direction--depending on whose perspective you take.

This is a perfect depiction of our relation to God. He gives and we receive.

He comes down for our salvation and we receive Him in faith.

But there is also the cross beam. This stretches out the arms in love.

This points in the direction of our neighbor.

Two weeks ago, we heard Paul say, "*Though I have all faith and give my body to be burned but have not love, I am a sounding gong or a clanging cymbal.*"

In Christ--and especially on the cross--we see faith and love come together.

Not two, separate and unrelated parts of the Christian life.

But one seamless garment, sewn together in Christ's death.

Two parts and two directions that make one whole.

The cross is Christ is both the source and the form of our life together.

And in this cross we see God most clearly.

We give thanks to you, heavenly Father, that you have refreshed us with this salutary gift. And we pray you that you would strengthen us, through the same, in faith toward you and in fervent love toward one another... Through Jesus Christ, our Lord.