

Lent 2

Psalm 73; 1 Cor 1:17-25; Mt 27:37-44; Hymns 422 453

Crosses show up in myriads of places--some of which make a person cringe. In particular, it is surprising how many wind up in military and quasi-military battles. Constantine, the first Christian Emperor, is said to have received a vision, "In this sign you will conquer." And used the cross to lead His soldiers to military victory. Soon they appeared on shields and armor on both sides of the battlefield. They have been emblazoned on battle tanks and adopted by the Nazi party. And all of this stems from the theological fact that Christ's cross gave us victory. But it should be immediately obvious that this triumphalist use of crosses is a gross perversion of the true victory of the cross. To those who were actually present at the crucifixion, a triumphant Jesus was not in the least on their minds. Jesus appeared victorious to no one. Not the soldiers who dominated Him by spear and whip and brute force. Nor to the thieves who felt in their bodies the agony that Jesus felt. Nor the chief priests who had bested him politically and crushed his movement. Not even the lowliest traveler on his way out of the city would have seen any glory or glimmer of strength as he read the sign, "Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews." This title above His cross was obviously intended as mockery and derision. And it was not just Jesus' enemies and strangers who saw Him as defeated and weak. His own disciples felt that way as well. If Christ couldn't prevent Himself from being arrested and crucified, how could He possibly protect his little band of followers? So "*They all forsook Him and fled.*" Those who did stay to watch continued to cringe and weep and sob at the unjust and cruel turn of events. Hardly the actions of people glorying in the cross. Instead, they saw defeat. Inglorious shame and abject weakness. This is the real cross. And it is only in seeing the real cross that you are positioned to know its victory. Unless the sight of the cross likewise evokes these feelings of shame and weakness and inglorious first, you will misunderstand the victory and the power that it proclaims. Among the controversies of the early church was the heresy of Doceticism--where Jesus only seemed to be a man and only seemed to be suffering and dying. Inwardly, in truth, He was laughing at the cross and feeling not a thing. In docetic thought, the cross was not real, at all, but a mere figment of the imagination. This was rejected as heresy and unfaithful to Scripture because it did not take His human nature seriously and therefore diminished the cross. This same heresy is alive whenever the cross bandied about as a symbol of earthly power and victory. Whether that is a political victory, moral victory, or rhetorical victory. Rather, the holy cross is nothing less than a symbol of earthly weakness and defeat. To glory in the cross is not to revel in God's apparent triumph over the powers of darkness--but to glory even when God is defeated in earthly terms! It is true that Jesus was victorious on the cross and through the cross. But this victory was not, is not, and can never be understood in earthly terms.

In earthly terms, the cross is always the defeat of God, the humiliation of God and the weakness of God. The victory of God is known only to the eyes of faith and only in heavenly terms. This is a vital lesson to know. Otherwise, if we glory in the cross of Christ as though it is an earthly victory which is not apparent just now, but will be apparent in time... Such hopes and dreams will be disappointed. And faith based upon them will fail and die. The true faith in Christ is to know fully the suffering and shame of the cross but to know that, in spite of--even through--the world's victory our victory is in heaven. For only then are we positioned to confess God's power at work in it. Only then are we ready to know that Christ defeated death--not with a fake death. ...that Christ defeated suffering--not with an imaginary suffering. But with the real thing. He truly died that we might live. And this true faith in the cross of Christ also has insights for how we might undertake our own lives under the cross. It is easy to speak of the cross as a glorious thing while we are not experiencing it. In such a vacuum, we are likely to be like Peter and boast about how we will endure it. But it is quite another matter to speak of the cross while we are in the midst of it. While we are suffering with illnesses; with Satan's attacks; with attacks from our enemies; with death and loss. While we are in the midst of these things, we are no longer blithely saying, "Bring it on. I can take it." Rather, we are asking, "Why me? Lord." Like Jesus on the cross, we are asking, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" We feel this way because we can see no light at the end of the tunnel. We see no earthly signs of victory -- only defeat and death. Faith in the cross of Christ does not deny this experience. It does not teach that, given enough faith you will defy earthly death. It does not teach that the pain is slight, or unreal, or inconsequential. Rather, Christ's cross teaches that it is precisely through the earthly cross and death that God gives heavenly victory and life. That what your eyes of flesh cannot, and will never see in your weakness and death, ...the eyes of faith can and do see **PRECISELY IN** that same weakness. Therefore, when you seem defeated, and weak. When every earthly measure tells you that God is far from you--far from your plight and far from your help... Lift your eyes again to the cross of Christ and know... ...that just as God was most crushing Satan at the moment of Jesus' death, ...the same God is most powerfully at work in your life through His Word. It rests not on appearances of earthly power or wisdom or might. But upon Jesus Christ and Him crucified--the power of God and the wisdom of God.