

Homily - Holy Cross day - 2020

John 3:16 (*This verse must be one of the most memorised in scripture*) For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Television sometimes graphically illustrates how cruel we can be to each other. What the poet Robert Burns referred to as “man’s inhumanity to man”. I’m talking about reality (like news) or drama. We may shudder at this fascination with the gruesome and the violent. And yet today we remember one of the most vicious forms of torture, one of the most dreadful means of execution. The Romans, according to history, crucified thousands. We catch a glimpse of the awfulness in the gospel accounts of the crucifixion of Jesus. The cross. And we call it holy.

Why? Jesus reminds us why, in this verse of scripture we read today. It is comforting, familiar, much loved. Yet when we consider what lies behind that simple word “gave”, we should indeed be shuddering.

There is huge pain here. Pain for God. Pain for humanity. Pain for the world. God the Father grieving sorely as his beloved Son made the ultimate sacrifice, and God-in-Jesus hanging there on the cross himself, enduring the pain: physical, emotional and spiritual.

Sinful, fallen humanity had drifted away from the holy one who loved them so much; the gap between them seemed such an enormous gulf - unbridgable. A God who loved us less might have given up on us altogether. Instead, God provided another remedy. Lifted up on the cross, Jesus would look like any other sinful human being, naked, humiliated and in pain. In human likeness, in human form, he humbled himself, and as a human absorbed our sins – yet destroyed them, for he was still God, our loving and self-giving God.

Son of Man, Son of God. Representative human, yet divine. Promising eternal life: that the world might be saved through him, brought back into the loving relationship with a holy God for which we were created.

That is why we can call the cross “holy”.

Look at the cross. There is huge pain here. But there is also huge love.

Holy Cross Day has been celebrated since the fourth century, when a church was dedicated in the Holy Land to house what was believed to be the very cross on which Christ died. The cross became the universal symbol of Christianity, replacing the fish that had identified the earliest Christians.

We are now so accustomed to the cross as a symbol of our faith that it comes as a shock to think of it in the same terms as an executioner’s axe, a guillotine, a lethal injection. Or worse, since those methods were (or are) relatively swift. The lingering death of the cross was prolonged torture.

If we wear a cross, we may suddenly feel uncomfortable having an instrument of torture around our neck, or pinned to the lapel of our jacket. Such discomfort is surely no bad thing, if it makes us think.

May it be a daily reminder of what God has done for us. The extent of God’s love and forgiveness.

Charles Wesley’s great hymn “And can it be”, which we heard at the start of this service, says it well: “Amazing love! how can it be that Thou, my God, should die for me?”

May we consider how to respond to such love.