

Sunday 17th September 2023; Benefice HC
Gilling; Patronal Festival Holy Cross

Hands up anyone who is wearing a cross?

Most people. I am too, I wouldn't go anywhere without it. A cross is a popular item of jewellery. I once heard of a shop assistant asking a customer whether she wanted a cross 'with or without the bloke on it'...

The cross can be seen everywhere. It's on our steeples and in our chancels. We carry the cross in procession and embroider it on our vestments and altar hangings. Today, some of us even have cross tattoos. In baptism, we are physically marked with the cross of Christ, and we make the sign of the cross on our bodies. When anointing and naming the priest does so making the sign of the cross and also when giving a blessing. Traditionally, it is a symbol to ward off evil. It was displayed on the clothing of the soldiers during the Crusades. A wooden cross was erected at the Battle of Heavenfield prior to St Oswald's miraculous victory over the pagans.

This is a 'holding cross' which I often give to suffering people to bring physical comfort. Millions of these are made and given out each year.

The cross is a powerful thing. We see it in so many places that I wonder if we don't even think much about what it symbolizes anymore – what it actually symbolizes. The cross isn't just what Jesus died on. It is what the Roman Empire used to brutally silence anyone suspected of treason and other crimes. The cross was an instrument of execution. And yet, here it is, the symbol of our faith. It would be like the modern equivalent of hanging a giant syringe or electric chair on the wall.

Today at Holy Cross Gilling we have the patronal festival Holy Cross Day, a festival of the church year celebrated every September 14th. Holy Cross Day traces its roots back to the fourth century, when it is said, Helena, the mother of Constantine, the first Christian ruler of the Roman Empire, was overseeing some archaeological digs in the Holy Land. At one excavation site, she unearthed what she believed to be the true cross of Jesus, a relic

which quickly became an object of veneration for pilgrims visiting Jerusalem – at the site over which the Church of the Resurrection now stands.

What an amazing paradox the cross is. It stands at the centre of our faith and our life together. It shows us where God is – in the foolish, despised, rejected things of this world. *The cross is why we are here.* To a non-believer, it doesn't make much sense *out there*, and it doesn't make any sense as a message to proclaim. But it's what we have, and it's absolutely necessary. The cross is our calling as the church. It calls us outside these walls, to the margins, alongside the suffering, to proclaim the message that God meets us where we are, as we are. The message of the cross proclaims that God is for us and with us, not against us, that God loves us. That's not something that really makes any sense. It's foolishness. But it's true. It is life in the midst of death, hope in the midst of desperation, love in the midst of what divides us. The holy and glorious God comes as one among us into human time. The holy and powerful God bends to us in weakness. The

holy and wise God chooses the way of folly – foolishness – and becomes God the crucified. That’s what happens on the cross. We’ve been bit by the power of sin but, says Jesus, “just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” The thing that was the enemy, sin and death, becomes the remedy, Christ crucified for the sin of the world. And now anyone that looks at him lifted up on the cross, seated on his heavenly throne, will live. That’s the power and the wisdom of God!

Holy Cross Day is another opportunity for the Cross of Christ to be portrayed before our very eyes, preached into our ears, planted in our hearts, and proclaimed with the very lips that have received His Body and His Blood, sacrificed for us upon the Cross, given and poured out for us in the Feast by which His holy and life-giving Cross is commemorated, and by which this holy day is celebrated.

I will end with a quote from the great Christian poet Thomas Traherne who said of the cross, *“The cross is the abyss of wonders, the centre*

of desires, the school of virtues, the house of wisdom, the throne of love, the theatre of joys, and the place of sorrows; it is the root of happiness and the gate of Heaven.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.