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“The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:18)

As we head into September, we come to the patronal festival for Holy Cross Gilling which will be celebrated this year on the 7th and 8th (although the actual date is 14th). This also falls in the Heritage Festival fortnight so there will be lots going on around the Benefice and Deanery. The celebration at Gilling is always a great event, especially the raffle!

The history of the festival of Holy Cross is interesting. It begins back in the year 335 in Jerusalem. The traditional story is that St. Helena, Emperor Constantine’s mother, discovered the true cross on which Christ was crucified. A church was built on this site where Christ was crucified, and the actual cross was housed there. 300 years later, Jerusalem was sacked by the Persians, and the church was destroyed, and the cross taken. Emperor Heraclius recovered the cross, and on this day in 629, returned it to Jerusalem.

According to an ancient tradition, the emperor, in his richest clothing, tried to carry the cross in procession from Jerusalem to Mount Calvary. The tradition says that when he tried to lift the cross, he found that it was too heavy, and he could not lift it up. The bishop of Jerusalem, seeing this, told the emperor that the only way to carry the cross was to do it as Christ had done it. So, the Emperor changed into the simple clothing of a pilgrim, and he took off his shoes. It was only then that he was able to carry the Holy Cross to the top of Mount Calvary.

This story shows us a paradox and tension that the church has always had with respect to its greatest symbol, the Cross. We want to celebrate it as the triumph of God’s love and lift it high, and of course, we should, for it is a glorious symbol of our amazing God. We want to put on our best clothing, and build our finest buildings, and make the Cross the symbol of glory and power and majesty. But like Emperor Heraclius, we find that the Cross is too heavy when we try to lift it in our way. Instead, we must humble ourselves and admit that the cross is a symbol of suffering and even death, and it is only through our suffering and death to our old way

of life and old way of seeing the world that we can take up the cross and carry it ourselves. We can only lift high the Cross through the divinely chosen way of humility and service.

To the world maybe we are foolish to celebrate a festival which lifts a symbol of humiliation and weakness for all the world to see. But to us, it shows the power of God's love. This is why we need to keep returning to Paul's first Letter to the Corinthians, especially on Holy Cross Day, and remember his message of the Cross which might seem foolish to the world, but to us it will always be the power of God's love and wisdom.

I will end with some marvellous words from the great theologian and poet Thomas Traherne, which capture the mystery and majesty of the Cross for us all,

“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.” (Centuries)

Every peace and blessing to you all.

Rev James.