

Sunday 8th September 2024; 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' Depictions of the cross can be seen everywhere. 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, and during anointing, we are marked with the cross, and we often make the sign of the cross on ourselves. When giving the blessing, the priest makes the sign of the cross in the air to convey God's grace. Traditionally, it is a symbol to ward off evil and for protection in conflict. It was displayed on the clothing of the soldiers during the Crusades. 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 then, is a powerful thing. We see it in so many places that I wonder whether we think much about what it actually symbolizes. The cross isn't just what Jesus died on. It is what the Roman Empire used as an instrument of execution, to brutally silence anyone suspected of treason and other crimes, equivalent today to the electric chair or scaffold, and yet, here it is, the symbol of our faith, because after Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, he abolished crucifixion as a death penalty and promoted the cross as a symbol of the Christian faith. His mother, St Helena, whose name was once associated with this church, was said to have discovered the site of the crucifixion of Jesus and the remains of the cross on which he was executed.

The cross then is an amazing paradox. It stands at the centre of our faith and our life together. Yet, there are

many people in the world who have no understanding of faith or hope and many who just don't care, or who are angry against all religions, not just Christianity. To a non-believer, the cross doesn't make any sense as a symbol of salvation when asking the big questions about life and death and about God. Even so, the Cross of Jesus gives them and us the answers. It is where God has taken into himself the ignorance, hatred, cruelty, oppression, prejudice and all the other forms of darkness of which we are all capable of feeling and showing towards each other. John tells us that in Jesus, God's intention in sending His Son, was not to condemn, convict and punish us because of our sin but to show us how we can overcome the poison of the sin and evil that lurks in and around us all the time. Believe in Him, says God, look at him and know that all the powers of darkness in the universe are nailed there in a mighty battle between good and evil, and my Love will triumph, because I so loved the world.

The cross is why we are here, it's what we have, and it's absolutely necessary. It is the symbol of God's love outside these walls, to those on the margins, the suffering, the lonely. It proclaims the message that God meets us where we are, as we are, that He is for us and with us, and that He loves us. That's not something that may not make any sense to our minds but speaks to our very innermost selves, our hearts, most profoundly, as something we most definitely need.

This Holy Cross Day then is another opportunity for the Cross of Christ to be commemorated and celebrated; portrayed before our eyes, preached to 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.

'The Dream of the Rood' is one of the earliest examples of Anglo-Saxon poetry. 'Rood' is an Old English word for 'Cross'. In a dream the unknown poet encounters a

beautiful tree, the cross on which Jesus died. The rood tells him its own story, how it was forced to be the instrument of the saviour's death, how it too suffered the nail wounds, spear shafts, and insults along with Christ to fulfil God's loving will.

I will end with a quote from the poem that is a lovely summary for Holy Cross Day, for us all, *“Now the time has come, that far and wide they will honour me, and pray to this sign. On me the Son of God suffered for a time; and so, glorious now I rise up under the heavens, and I am able to heal each of those who is in awe of me.”*

Thanks be to God. Amen.