

Sunday 14th September 2025; 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'...

However, in a recent poll, 88% of people recognised this (McDonald's logo) and only 54% recognized what the cross represented. This is arguably the greatest challenge facing the church today. There are many people who have no understanding of the Christian faith and many who just don't care. There are many who are angry and hurt because of religions, and not just Christianity.

Nevertheless, people still unavoidably continue to ask the big questions about life; what is life all about? What does it all mean? Is life worth living? Where do I go after I die? And what has been the point of it all? Is there a God, and if there is, why does he allow such suffering? Who is Jesus and what's he got to do with me? These questions are considered in the Alpha course coming up later in September. We cannot escape these questions and sooner or later we will feel compelled to voice them. I call these moments 'hitting the existential buffers' and I came across it many times working as a community palliative care chaplain, when people who initially were antagonistic or not interested in spirituality realised where they were and asked for prayer. It was often this, a holding cross, that gave them comfort.

Despite the results of that poll, the cross can still be seen if you look. 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 or blessing the priest makes the sign of the cross. Traditionally, it is a symbol to ward off evil. It was displayed on the clothing of the soldiers during the Crusades. St Oswald at the battle of Heavenfield famously lifted a wooden cross on the battlefield and prayed for victory over the pagan army and he won against the odds.

The cross is the symbol of the Christian faith, of eternal life, yet it was also what the Roman Empire used to brutally silence anyone suspected of treason and other crimes as an instrument of execution. Yet, here it is, the symbol of our faith. It would be like the modern equivalent of hanging a syringe or electric chair on the wall or as an item of jewellery around your neck.

The cross is an amazing paradox. It once was a s gruesome symbol of death but to believers it is the symbol of life. 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, yet at the same time, the *cross is why we are here*. To a non-believer, it doesn't make sense as a message to proclaim. But it's what we have, and it is absolutely necessary. The cross represents 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, that God loves us. That's not something that humanly speaking doesn't makes any sense, but the cross speaks universally to the

world. It speaks to us of something in us that is beyond words and understanding, but reaches out to our innermost being, the spark of God within all of us.

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 receive 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.