

# THE CROSS IN FOUR DIMENSIONS

## Reflections for Good Friday 2021 prepared by Canon Angela Tilby

### 1. THE EMPTY CROSS



#### **The End of Sin**

This is an image of a strong, stark, empty cross standing against the sky. This is the cross I remember from my teenage years as an evangelical Christian. The cross was empty because Christ was not there. The cross was empty because Christ's work was done and could never be repeated. Christ had paid the price of sin and so freed me from guilt and punishment. And in my teenage years, guilt, and the threat of some nameless, overhanging punishment weighed heavily.

For many years this is how I saw the cross. I didn't mind singing about 'the cruel nails and crown of thorns', but I didn't want to *see* them. For me, the empty cross was tidy, neat and final, and it gave me a clarity about my faith which I valued. But as the years went by I came to wonder. I came to see that the empty cross could lead to a Christianity which struggles to acknowledge human weakness. *If* the cross is empty, *if* Christ has died for my sins, then surely my life should be both fulfilled and victorious? What happens, then, when I fail, when I doubt, when I experience sin and shame and loss? The empty cross may be majestic, but it is also rather lonely, and even isolating.

In the course of time I came to explore other dimensions of the cross. But I would never dismiss the empty cross. It stands for a simple finality that is important for all Christians. The empty cross reminds me of the evangelical conviction that Christ died *for me*. Salvation is personal. Each person is uniquely precious to God, and this is affirmed by the sign of the cross etched on our foreheads when we are baptised, an indelible sign of our union with Christ. It also recalls the empty cross which adorns the cells of those friars and sisters who belong to the Carmelite order. This reminds each person that they are called to a life of total unselfishness, a crucified life.

The empty cross also provides a challenge. It questions the pride of the self-made man or woman, it questions our vanity, our sense of *me first*. In its simplicity and clarity it speaks to some of those who have no taste for church going, and see little value in history or tradition. The empty cross is a signpost, pointing beyond itself. It asks us, not just to gaze on it, but to recognise that it is scored into our being.

So as you reflect on the empty cross think of what it means to have the cross inscribed on your forehead. How does the cross manifest in the way you live your life? Are there things you need to empty out of your life? A tendency to greed, a desire to dominate relationships, a sense of entitlement? All our human weaknesses can be brought to the cross, where all is forgiven.

A reading to reflect on: Romans 4.1-8

## 2. THE CRUCIFIX



### The End of Pain

This is the cross my evangelical self was uneasy with. Here is Jesus, nailed to the cross, painfully suspended by nails through his hands and feet. This is not a cross which stands empty and stark against the dark sky. This is Christ suffering, *now*, not in the past but in the present, 'See from his head, his hands, his feet; sorrow and love flow mingled down.' You will find the crucifix on a wall, a pious kitchen, or a school or a study, or in pendant form as the cross given at Confirmation. It is the cross you might find on a rood screen or an altar. It is the cross of blood and thorns and wounds. My teenage self found the crucifix shocking. I couldn't understand how fellow Christians could live with this daily depiction of torture. I liked the clean and empty cross. I didn't want all that suffering and pain here and now in the present.

But if the empty cross emphasises 'Christ alone', suffering for our salvation, the crucifix reminds us that Jesus did not, in fact, die alone. There were the thieves crucified alongside him, and John the Beloved Disciple and Mary his Mother, who are so often shown with him. St Luke's account of the crucifixion also shows how onlookers and strangers were drawn in as Christ made his way to the Cross. There is Simon of Cyrene, carrying the cross, there are the crowds of wailing women. And that is why when you look at the crucifix you begin to be drawn in, not only to Christ's suffering, but the suffering of the whole world. It invites pity and empathy. And the crucifix may also remind you and reveal to you the suffering life has imposed on you. And at this point the crucifix can be profoundly comforting. When you are in mental or physical pain it simply helps to know that Christ went through it too. My pain may not be taken away but it is recognised and shared. There may be no answers to my suffering, but the crucifix shows me I am not alone. When we look at Christ on the cross it helps us to recognise his suffering in the those who are sick, poor or afraid. And also to see his sacrifice in those who are caring selflessly for people overwhelmed by illness and anxiety. The crucifix meets our loneliness. It tells us of a God who cares and loves to the end.

But the crucifix can also impose a false burden, a martyr complex, a desire to suffer for its own sake. At this point we must remember that the cross is a cross of salvation not destruction. God calls us to life. That may be life, through death, but it is still life, not death, which triumphs.

The crucifix also brings a challenge. Am I prepared to walk in the way of the cross? To carry the cross for someone else, or let my own cross be carried? Am I prepared to give my life for Christ as he has given his life for mine? How do I respond today to the Christian call to self-sacrifice and costly witness?

Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
That were a present far too small;  
Love so amazing, so divine,  
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

A reading to reflect on: Luke 23.26-38

### 3 THE EIGHT-POINTED CROSS



#### **The End of Death**

This is a gold cross with three cross beams and eight points. It is the way the cross is portrayed in many Orthodox churches, in Russia, Greece, Serbia and other parts of the Orthodox world. This cross is empty, but it is not plain. The top beam represents the inscription: 'Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews'. The central beam is where Christ's hands were nailed and the lower beam supports his feet. The points of the lower beam are different – the right points up and the left, down. This cross is not an illustration but a symbol. It carries a message, and its message is the end of death. If you go into an Orthodox Church you won't find a cross on the altar. The cross is set to one side as a place of prayer. That is because in Orthodoxy, the point is not to dwell on the death of Christ in itself so much as to see that death as the prelude to the Resurrection: 'Death is trampled down by death, and to those in the tomb he has given life', as the Orthodox sing in the Easter liturgy.

It is not that Christ pays the price of sin and sets us free from guilt and punishment. It is not that Christ invites us to shoulder the cross in solidarity with others. It is more that the cross and the resurrection are simply inseparable. Death is defeated because the one who dies is immortal. This is the cross seen as a cosmic victory. It speaks not so much to our guilt, or to our loneliness, but to our anxiety. And there is a huge amount of anxiety around at the present time. We wonder, Will it all be OK? Will my loved ones be OK? Will I be OK? The world this Holy Week, this Good Friday and Easter seems extraordinarily fragile and yet terrifying; the patterns of nature being disrupted, the virus continuing to wreak havoc to lives and to our economy. Even our common life and our politics seem corrupted. I think it is precisely this moment of terrified panic which is confronted by the eight-pointed cross. The lower cross-bar points up and down. Up to the immortal one, who dies for us and with us, and down to hell where all humanity lies trapped in fear. This cross defeats the hells we, knowingly or unknowingly make for ourselves. It tells us that our hopes for the world are not just wishful thinking, but part of the energy of the Holy Spirit within us, the same Spirit that is calling us, animals and plants as well as humans, oceans and mountains as well as living beings, to flourish and diversify in praise of our creator.

As we travel through this difficult time of sickness and uncertainty this cross proclaims the distant drums of Christ's victory over death, 'Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and to those in the tomb he has given life'. The challenge here is to acknowledge the depth of our fears and, then turning away from ourselves, to rest in the greater depth of Christ's love. For he, when he is lifted up, draws all people to himself.

He endured the nails, the spitting,  
Vinegar and spear and reed;  
From that holy Body pierced  
Blood and water forth proceed:  
Earth and stars and sky and ocean  
By that flood from stain are freed.

A reading to reflect on John 12.20-33



## The End of Hell

The final image is of a cross with equal arms, linked by a circle, and with a circle at its centre. This is a Celtic cross, suggesting a *mandala*, a geometric shape to inspire meditation. A cross, then, to focus on, a cross that can draw me into a sense of completion and resolution. The different themes of the Passion story are here wound into a whole. And perhaps that will help bring the conflicting themes of my own life a little closer together. St Paul writes to the Philippians: 'Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus'. He is encouraging them to grow into a gentle-minded community, not one where raging egos tear each another apart. He then speaks of Christ's humility. Humility does not come naturally. It is where we are most *different* from God. I have to remember that God has in his nature no shred of pride or aggression or competitiveness. God is not thin-skinned, vain, greedy or needy. We have to learn that this is true of God before we can really begin to confront our own egoism and begin to practice humility in our own lives, because we can lapse into thinking of God as an angry tyrant who protects some of his favourites some of the time and lashes out when insulted. But this is not the God of the Bible. It is not the God of Jesus. And the passion story exposes this idol for what it is. It is no more than our old selves projected on to the screen of heaven. The true God is not like this at all. He is the King of Love, the Shepherd of our souls, and Jesus is his human face. This cross shows us where all our contradictions meet: human weakness and divine strength, human wickedness and divine judgement, human grief and divine compassion.

We each have our cross to bear. Our personal cross is etched into our biology, our personality, our history, our deepest relationships. The circled cross tells us that suffering is unavoidable in this life, but it also holds out the promise that suffering can be consecrated and creative. Christian faith has always looked beyond time and beyond history to a way of being which is pure love and peace, for which the only word we have is *heaven*. Paul, writing to the Philippians, suggests that we can begin heaven now by our response to the cross. Jesus came from God and to God he returns. He has brought God's life into the human world and his life is already flowing into the world, through the blood and water that runs from his wounded side. *This* cross shows time cut open to reveal the constant loving divine presence which holds the world in being, and brings us all to eternal fellowship with God. And this is why the final note of Good Friday is not sorrow, or remorse of grief, but thankfulness. The crucified Christ has squared the circle and redeemed the time, he has paid the price and restored our life, and all life. As a fourth century Bishop and theologian, Gregory of Nazianzus put it:

Yesterday I was crucified with Christ;  
 Today I am glorified with him.  
 Yesterday I was dead with Christ;  
 Today I am sharing in his resurrections.  
 Yesterday I was buried with him;  
 Today I am waking with him from the sleep of death.

A reading to reflect on: Philippians 2.5-11