

*A Sermon by Father Dwight D. Duncan, ssc - Rector, St Matthias' Church, Dallas, Texas*

**THE EXALTATION OF THE HOLY CROSS**  
**September 12, 2004 (transferred from September 14)**

*We adore thee, O Christ, and we bless thee.  
Because by thy holy cross thou hast redeemed the world.*

This is the anthem which begins the prayers at each station of that devotional service called *The Stations of the Cross*. **The Cross.** Among Christians, you cannot get away from the Cross. It hangs before our eyes in our worship places; it fills the hymns we sing. And, at least for us Catholic Christians, countless times between our birth into the Church and our death to this world, the Cross is being traced over us, either by a priest or by ourselves.

From the beginning of the Christian community this has been so. The second century Christian theologian, Tertullian, said of the Christians of his day, "*At every forward step and movement, when coming in and going out, when putting on our clothes, when putting on our shoes, when bathing, when at table, when lighting the lamps, when reclining, when sitting, in all the ordinary occupations of our daily lives, we furrow our forehead with the Sign.*"

Why has this heavy use of the Sign of the Cross ever been the case among Christians? It has been so because the Tree of the Cross is the center of our understanding of Reality. It is the abiding witness both to what we know in the deepest recesses of our being and also to that for which we hope.

What is it that we know? We know we are a people in exile, homeless, wandering, afraid, and in our fear striking out, even at one another. And this exile began at a tree in a garden in which God had placed us for delight and for fellowship with him. In this Garden called Eden, at one of its trees, we discovered our jealousy of God, even our anger that he was God and we were not. How dare he set boundaries for us in which we had to live!

So we attempted to displace God. But in our attempt to displace him, we were ourselves displaced. Since we desired no boundaries, God allowed us our choice and out we wandered from the protective boundaries of the Garden into a world where pain is always waiting for us just round the corner. And of most of this pain, we ourselves are the cause.

No one escapes this condition. Everyone, by virtue of birth into a human community fallen from its original existence, now lives outside the Garden. We are all homeless. And while we attempt to hide from this fact by surrounding ourselves with comforts and telling ourselves that we are okay, we succeed only for a moment. Soon enough, disease, child molestation, drive-by shootings, starvation, bankruptcies, murder, divorce, addiction, depression, war, pettiness, gossip, and so many other things slap up against us and reveal to us how far we are from home. For a true home is where peace, joy, harmony, and love abound.

This is what we know in the deepest recesses of our being: we are in exile, *self*-exile, longing for home. And the Cross is the abiding witness to this fact.

But the Cross is also the abiding witness to that for which we hope. What is it for which we hope? We hope that exile and pain and disharmony shall not be the end for us, but that there is a way back to the garden of delight and fellowship with God and with one another.

Behold, the Way! Just as our journey away from God into pain and despair began at a tree, so our journey back to Him and to eternal delight begins at a tree, raised high on a hill by us, to accommodate our slaughter of God. Here is the most sublime of paradoxes: the way back to that Garden we name Heaven is built on one of the surest signs of our exile, a tool crafted by human hands *solely* for the purpose of killing other humans, and killing them in the most agonizing way possible.

The Cross of Christ accomplishes such a saving feat by facing us, at one and the same time, with two great Truths. One truth is the horror of our Sin, which seeks to murder everything and everyone who gets in our way, and which ends up destroying us. The other truth is that God's love for us is so great that he would rather die at our hands than kill us. When any person fully, FULLY, faces and embraces these Truths, it is as if the Cross of Christ penetrates his heart, splitting it open in repentance. And then the Cross falls down before him, a bridge over which he can walk into the waiting arms of God.

Today we keep the Feast of the Holy Cross. This feast takes us back to a day over 1600 years ago, when workmen in Jerusalem broke through a land-fill created by the Romans in 135 A.D. on Golgotha, the site of Jesus' crucifixion.

Almost 200 years later, in 326, the first Christian Emperor of Rome, Constantine, ordered the erection of a complex of buildings in Jerusalem on the site of our Lord's crucifixion and resurrection. He wanted this complex built in order to set forth this blessed site as an object of veneration and hope for all.

Constantine's mother, the Empress Helena, was supervising the archaeological excavations and building construction. Church historians claimed that Jesus' cross and those of the thieves crucified with him had been buried on Golgotha.

So when, during the excavations of this garbage heap, three crosses were discovered embedded in that layer which in the mid-first century was the top of Golgotha's hill, Helena thought it very possible that one of the three was the True Cross. How to discover if this were so, and if so, which one?

At that moment the funeral procession of a young man was wending its way past the site. An idea came to Helena: Jesus, the Crucified, was also Jesus, the Risen. Helena ordered all three crosses to be held over the young man's body, to see what, if any effect each would have. The shadow of the first covered him; nothing happened. Then the shadow of the second; nothing happened. As the shadow of the third embraced him, he arose. This one, Helena concluded, must be the Cross of Christ.

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It is our great privilege to have in our parish treasury a relic of this True Cross, two splinters from it crossed over one another. The workmen touched the splintered wood with awe and wonder. Other eyes would have seen only its ugliness, but to them it was an object of beauty, pulsing with the love and mercy of God which entered them and set them tingling with joy.

And so it should have. For God took this most obscene of instruments made by human hands and used it to save us from ourselves. God took this tool of execution by which we sought to rid ourselves of him forever and used it to draw us back to himself. God took this witness to our own depravity and used it to impress us with his love. What we fashioned to take life, God re-fashioned to give us life. Thus our tree of death, by the love and mercy of God, is become for us the Tree of Life, and it shines forever with his own glory.

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