

The Festival of the Holy Cross, A*D, 2008

John 12:20-33 Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. ²¹ So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." ²² Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. ²³ And Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴ Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵ Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him. ²⁷ "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I have come to this hour. ²⁸ Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven: "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." ²⁹ The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." ³⁰ Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not mine. ³¹ Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. ³² And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." ³³ He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1 The cross. It's trendy. Movie stars and punk rockers wear crosses and crucifixes. Major league baseball players make the sign of the Holy Cross before stepping up to the plate, probably not as a reminder that they've been baptized into Christ's death. There are crosses on the roadsides to mark where people have died in car crashes and crosses high in the sky outside our churches. There's one on your hymnal, one on the altar wall, one by the lectern, two on my stole, and countless others that you'll see today and days afterward.

Why?

2 Would you wear a pendant of an electrical chair or a hangman's noose? But those are tame compared to the cross. Those are neat, clean ways of putting someone to death compared to crucifixion. Would you make the sign of waterboarding or whips and chains after scoring a touchdown? Would you put a statue of a firing squad on top of a loved one's grave? So why does a cross, an instrument of Roman death-torture appear nearly everywhere?

3 Death by crucifixion was fairly commonplace in the Roman empire. Jewish historian Josephus records that the Romans crucified thousands of people, sometimes hundreds at a time. When Spartacus' slave rebellion failed, some 6,000 of his followers were crucified at once. Not something done to common criminals, crucifixion was reserved for the lowest members of society and the vilest criminals: slaves, traitors, pirates, and worse. It was preceded by scourging—whipping the criminal until he lost so much blood he was nearly in shock. Then he carried the horizontal beam of his death device out to the place of execution. Crucifixion was so commonplace that some places had the vertical beams of the crosses permanently planted in the ground. The death was horrific and public, warning others not to trespass against Rome lest they suffer a similar fate.

So why does this instrument of torture serve as a trendy piece of jewelry or a more-potent good luck charm than a rabbit's foot?

4 Frankly, it's more than a little foolish. When the Greeks sought to see Jesus, Jesus answered them that the hour had come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Like a grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies, His hour of glory would be the hour of His death. That's right; the glory of God is the death of God. For the purpose of dying, Jesus came. His death on a cross overshadowed His entire life. From the cute baby in a manger, whose life was narrowly spared when King Herod killed all the other cute baby boys in Jerusalem to the man who wept violently at the death of Lazarus, everything was for this purpose: to die on the cross.

5 Why? Why does God take on human flesh? Why is He born of a virgin? Why does He live 33 years on the earth? Why was He arrested? Why was He given a death sentence? Why was God flogged, nailed to a cross, and left hanging to die? Jesus answered in today's Gospel lesson: "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself." Without the cross, without the death of God in the place of all sinners, people could never be drawn to God. Sinners cannot dwell in God's presence. The torture Jesus endured on the cross was secondary to the torture God endures at the thought of His beloved creatures spending eternity separated from Him.

6 So repent. Give up hoping for a neat, tidy, crossless Christianity. There is no Christ without His cross. There is no Jesus except for the One who came to die for your sin. Repent of wanting a Jesus to liberate you from debt or oppression. Repent of thinking of the Holy Cross as a magic trinket or good luck charm. Repent of seeking after signs and wisdom. Repent of trying to separate Jesus from His cross.

7 The cross is foolishness. It makes no sense. What would have made sense would have been for God to scrap rebellious humanity, let them go to hell if that's what they wanted, and start fresh. It would have made sense if He relaxed His standard of perfection just a bit so humans could earn their way back into His favor. It would have made sense if God took on human flesh and came to earth so He could show people how to live or impart some special wisdom to them. But none of this happened. No, the most foolish thing possible happened. God took human flesh so He could take humanity's sinfulness. He went willingly to the cross to suffer and die to forgive everyone his sinfulness—even you.

8 The cross, the death of God, is the source of your life. By being raised up on the cross, Jesus has drawn you to Himself. He has drawn you into His death through the waters of Holy Baptism. There, the cross

became yours. The death of Jesus took away your sin—not 2,000 years ago, but at the moment of your baptism. Don't you know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? That's why we make the sign of the cross. It's not a good luck gesture, and it won't implore Jesus to help you hit some home runs. But it will remind you that in the ordinary waters of Holy Baptism, God joined you into the death and resurrection of Himself. The sign of the cross, which Dr. Luther tells you to make every morning, every night, and several times in between, reminds you of the death of Jesus, which He died for you.

9 The cross is the heart of Christianity. Sure, it's foolish, but God's foolishness is wiser than you'll ever be. What seems foolish to us, is the wisdom through which God saw fit to save you—through the cross. And so we, along with St. Paul, preach Christ crucified. In the preaching of Christ crucified, you have life. In the declaration of Holy Absolution, the application of what Jesus did on the cross to you today, you have forgiveness and eternal life. Yes. That's foolishness to those who are dying. But to you who are being saved through the Lord's gift of faith, it is the power of God.

In the name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria
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