

Triumph of the Cross

September 14, 2008

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In the Divine Cluster, you ask questions such as, “Who (or What) is God?” “What does that mean for us?” and, most of all, “How do we know?”

There are many possible answers. Some see God in the beauty of creation; others in the excellence of human achievement, in great creativity or heroism or power. Some find God in friendship or community or justice. Others see God’s hand guiding history, whether our own, or that of our people or of the world, toward a predetermined end. Some find God in that point of stillness and peace at the center of the human heart when all distractions have been stripped away.

I expect you will encounter these answers and many like them in your explorations this year, and with good reason. All have proved useful in coming to a knowledge of God; indeed, as a spiritual director, I have used most of them as ways to help people enter into prayer. However, for a Christian, none of these captures the essence of who God is or how we can come to know God. For the Christian, the answer is right here: the Cross, or as this feast proclaims, the Triumph of the Holy Cross.

All of the other answers are ambiguous. While they can give us a sense of God’s presence intuitively and emotionally, they also have natural explanations, in spite of what some creationists might say. Not so the Cross. Without God it makes no sense whatsoever. Think about what it is

we are venerating here. The Cross was the cruelest means of torture and death known to the ancient world, reserved for the most dangerous and hated criminals, their agony and humiliation a warning to anyone who would consider following them.

It was only in light of Christ's resurrection from the dead that his followers came to grasp the meaning of the mystery. The instrument of death became lifegiving; the image of humiliation filled them with hope; the sign of defeat became a promise of victory. We see this in the vision of Constantine commemorated in our College seal: "*In hoc signo vinces*, in this sign you will triumph."

So what does this confounding, illogical celebration of the Triumph of the Cross have to say in answer to our questions? The answer is everything. The Cross reveals three truths that together shape the Christian understanding of God. They are:

- God is close.
- God cares.
- God acts.

First, God is close. Christianity shares with the great monotheistic tradition, including Judaism and Islam, the reverence for the holiness of God, that God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfect in every way, in other words, everything we are not. Yet at the same time, at the center of Christianity is the belief that in Jesus Christ God has become fully human without ceasing to be God, as the second reading articulates so beautifully. This goes beyond communication or even friendship. It is complete identification, "in

all things but sin.” The Cross shows how far that goes. In the Cross we see God, not as a cute, lovable little baby, but as a man broken, helpless, scorned as a criminal and driven to the furthest limits of human suffering. So deep is God’s commitment to us that Jesus takes on not just what is beautiful and lovable about our humanity but what is most unlovable, what we ourselves would shun if we could.

Second, God cares. This stunning commitment to us came because, in the words of the Gospel, “God so loved the world.” The ultimate act of love is self-sacrifice; and that is what we see in the Cross. As Paul wrote in his Epistle to the Romans, “It is rare that anyone should lay down his life for a just person, though it is barely possible that for a good person someone may have the courage to die. It is precisely in this that God proves his love for us: that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” God wants nothing from us but our own good, especially the ultimate good, “eternal life.” For that Christ paid the ultimate price.

Finally, God acts. In Christ God becomes a part of our history, and through the Cross that history takes a decisive turn. To explain the meaning of the Cross, Jesus refers back to the story we saw in the first reading. The people are sick unto death with the poison of their sin. In answer to their desperate pleas for help, God confronts them with the image and source of their affliction, which becomes, by God’s unaccountable power, the source of their healing. We too, individually and as a people, are sick with the poison of our sins: self-indulgence and greed, envy and pride, violence and abuse, injustice, oppression and neglect of those in need. By mounting the Cross, Jesus takes all that on himself, as it were drawing the poison out of

us, so that we can be healed. To turn death into life, liberating all his people from the bonds of sin, is the ultimate manifestation of God's power. Compared to that moving a mountain is child's play.

What does this mean for us, particularly for those who profess to be Christians? As St. Paul wrote, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst." If you seek a genuine encounter with Christ, you cannot hide from sin and its effects, your own or in others'. You must embrace the Cross, for that is where Christ is. That means being with the needy, the broken, the despised. It also means acknowledging that we are no different. Thus solidarity with the poor and marginalized is not just a matter of service or a commitment to justice, as commendable as they are; nor is it simply a moral imperative. It is at the heart of Christian spirituality, because it is how we know Christ.

Many of our students have found this when, for example, they pursue immersion experiences in Mexico, Jamaica, Africa, the Gulf Coast, or South Worcester. Typically they go with the admirable intention of sharing their many gifts and advantages with those who have so little. What they find, however, is that they receive so much more. In their encounter with the people, they encounter a faith more real than their own, one that is truly lifegiving. They encounter the living Christ, often for the first time. I have had similar experiences myself, as have most Jesuits I know.

This understanding of the Cross also illuminates our experience of the church. What is the church after all than a group of sinners in the process of being healed, and striving to be good, with more or less success? We

should not be scandalized by that. It is the reality of Christ and his Cross and therefore something beautiful. The great Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor, once noted, "The operation of the church is entirely set up for the sake of the sinner, which creates much misunderstanding among the smug." The hallmark of O'Connor's fiction is a deep compassion and appreciation for those who struggle in life with failure and misfortune, who are so often looked down on by the privileged and self-righteous. From her own experience of the Cross as it marked her life, she was able to see Christ in others whose beauty was hidden by hardship, suffering and the sheer ordinariness of their existence. Anyone who wants to be a true follower of Christ must learn to do the same.