

One of the hardest realities we face in this life is when wicked people take the lives of others, people undeserving of death, in acts of horrendous violence. Little children shot to death at schools. Men assassinated while speaking to crowds. Thousands dying in burning, collapsing buildings. These, and the countless other events like them throughout history make us cry out with the Psalmist, “How long, O Lord?”

And yet with the Psalmist, and with God’s people throughout the ages, they also direct us to the promises of the Lord, how He is able to bring good out of even the worst evils we see in our lives. We may not see be able to see the good with our own eyes, or within our own lifetimes, but God is always there, working to guide all things toward good.

This is, perhaps, the main point of the Festival we celebrate today: The Festival of the Holy Cross. The cross as a symbol of the Christian faith is, in our day, nothing too strange or provocative. It’s been used as that for centuries and centuries. It’s found on church buildings, jewelry, flags, bumper stickers, belt buckles, and many other places.

We often forget that the cross was a method of execution, an instrument of death. Imagine if you came to church and there was an electric chair on the altar, or a shiny brass replica of the gas chamber at the old pen up there. What if I had a silver noose hanging from my neck rather than a crucifix? You’d probably think it bizarre, morbid, or even disgusting!

To bring out the illustration even further, remember that gas chambers, electric chairs, and gallows were all designed to execute people with as little suffering as possible. The cross, on the other hand, had been perfected by the ancient Romans into an instrument of suffering. It was designed to be as painful, as agonizing a death as possible. So why is it universally used as a symbol of Christianity?

There are several very good reasons why, several reasons why we rightly regard the cross as holy, meaning set apart for the things of God. The first is that, as an instrument of execution, it is a reminder of death. Death is something that, in the worst way, unites all mankind. As the Bible makes very clear, all have sinned, and the wages of sin is death.

Sometimes that death comes about from our bodies suffering the effects of sin, eventually being overcome by heart attacks, cancer, infections, and many other things. Other times, that death comes about from being sinned against, when the wicked murder their fellow man, shedding blood that was not theirs to shed. However it comes about, though, death is always the result of sin. Thus, the cross is a reminder to us and to everyone who sees it of the inevitable.

Yet our God does something with this horrible instrument of death, making it into the very means of giving life. This is prefigured with the Bronze Serpent, which we heard about in our Old Testament reading. The people of Israel had sinned against God, and so the Lord sent serpents among them to injure and even kill them.

Yet when the Lord's discipline had done its work, causing the people to repent and cry out to the Lord for deliverance, He caused Moses to make bronze serpent and put it up on a pole, so that whoever had been bitten could look to it and live. A symbol of what had been killing the Israelites was made to be the thing that brought them life.

So it is with the cross. More than just a mere symbol, God used the cross to bring about our deliverance from death. And He did so by coming and Himself dying on it. Like the cross itself, this is something that we as Christians just sort of take for granted, but this was incredibly strange, even scandalous for those outside the faith. As St. Paul writes, "For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles." The cross goes utterly against the expectations of both, and of those of our human nature, if we're honest.

The Jews demand signs. Throughout Jesus' ministry, this was a common refrain: "Show us a sign." Over and over. And Jesus did plenty of signs. But they were never enough. Why not? Because people rejected the message that went with the signs, that Jesus was there to save them if they would repent and believe.

But they thought that, because they were children of Abraham, they didn't need anyone to save them. Jesus was just there as an option, not a requirement, there to improve their earthly lives while they waited for the eternity to which they were entitled. Jesus dying on the cross flies in the face of all that. They want worldly splendor, not another sacrifice.

In fact, they can offer all the sacrifices needed. They can keep the Law of Moses just fine on their own. That God would have to die for them, that's rather insulting. So is the cross a scandal for everyone who thinks that he's fine and can earn heaven by himself.

Likewise, the cross is offensive to the Gentiles, to the Greeks who think that wisdom is the key. For centuries, their philosophers had sought how to unlock the secrets of life with their minds. They sought to comprehend and therefore in a sense conquer the universe through their reason and intellect.

Many different approaches came out, such as the hedonists who said life was all about being happy and enjoying life, or the stoics who held that the secret of life was being resilient and holding yourself above the world and its troubles, or the epicureans who held that the main point of life was to do whatever was necessary to avoid pain and fear.

The idea that the sole God of the universe would come and willingly subject Himself to pain and even death rather than remain aloof from the troubles of the world was simply ridiculous. In the footsteps of these Greeks are all those who see human reason as the greatest good and are unwilling to humble themselves before a God who both transcends them and yet dies for them.

Yet as St. Paul continues, the message of the cross is the very power and wisdom of God. Jesus even speaks of the cross as His glory, saying that, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." At the cross, we see the glory of God, the thing that shows Him for who He is.

He isn't a god whose greatest splendor is signs and wonders that impress our eyes, though He certainly has worked those, but He is the God whose splendor is letting Himself be publicly put to death for the sake of those whom He has created.

He isn't a god whose greatest joy comes from receiving the thanks and praise of His worshipers, though He certainly delights in them, but He is the God whose greatest joy was enduring the cross and despising its shame so that He might bring men to dwell with Him forever.

He isn't a god whose love must or even can be purchased with sacrifice and offering, though He gladly receives offerings made in faith, but He is the God whose love is unfathomable and unchanging, whose love leads Him to lay down His life even for those who hate Him.

Our God chose to come to this earth as one of us, and endure the death common to us all, even a death that is the definition of tragic. He died at an age we would see as too soon, with many years of life no doubt left. He died a death of injustice, with lies and slander leading to His conviction and weakness and indifference preventing his exoneration. He died a death of suffering, one so painful that it's literally where we get the word "excruciating." As we mourn all the death that we see in this world, we can look to the cross and know that our God has experienced it to its awful fullness.

And yet at the cross, He overcame death, turning what was meant for evil into the greatest good. As Jesus says, at the cross, the ruler of this world, Satan, was cast down. All his accusations were answered by the blood of Jesus, all the debt of God's people paid for. At the cross, injustice – one innocent Man suffering for the sins of guilty humanity – was turned to mercy, as that one Man paid the price that no other man could pay.

At the cross, Jesus overcame death, that thing that horribly unites all mankind, and in its place brought eternal life for all who believe. That's why Jesus says, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." The symbol of fear and torture has become a beacon of love and hope for all humanity.

Like the Israelites suffering from the serpent bites and looking up to the Bronze Serpent, every single man and woman in the world today – all doomed to die – can look at the Holy Cross and know that the God of all Creation died there for him or her. Hanging on the cross, we see the God who loves us so much that He didn't just give us a hand or some useful instruction, but even His own life.

As we are confronted by the terrible reality of death in this life, we look to the cross and are reminded that, because of Jesus, death doesn't have to be the end. As Jesus says, "If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also." All those who have died believing in Jesus, having His gift of faith in their hearts and serving Him with their lives, are not truly dead. They have kept their lives for eternity. They have followed Jesus, being brought by Him through death into the splendor of everlasting life, just as the cross led to the empty tomb. They are experiencing the truth of Jesus' promise to His disciples, that "Because I live, you also will live."

When our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ die, we mourn, as we love them and miss them. And we strive to preserve life, to defend the weak and innocent, as our Lord has commanded us to do.

But even when death comes, no matter how terrible it might seem at the time, it cannot pull someone out of the arms of Jesus. At the cross, we see power and wisdom and love of God at work to turn even the greatest evil to the greatest good.

Because of the cross, we have the assurance that “neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

In His holy name, amen.