



It is a crime to put a Roman citizen in chains, it is an enormity to flog one, sheer murder to slay one: what, then, shall I say of crucifixion? It is impossible to find the word for such an abomination. *Marcus Tullius Cicero(died 40 BC)*

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March 3rd Third Sunday of Lent First Corinthians 1: 22-25

Cross or crucifix?

The answer to this question comes with all kinds of theological “baggage”. Historically, Churches in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions venerate crucifixes (the cross with the body of Jesus) whilst those in the broad Protestant traditions have the cross without the body of Jesus. There are many who find the crucifix offensive and point to the fact that Jesus has risen so the body is not on the cross.

I always prefer to have crucifixes. The simplest answer to questions about my choice both come from Paul in **1 Corinthians 1:23** *but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles*, and **2:2** *For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified*.

There is a wonderful exclamation in the ancient Byzantine Easter liturgy that runs *Christ is risen from the dead! By death he trampled death and to those in the tombs he granted life!* It is not that the crucifix denies the resurrection. One follows on, necessarily from the other. In the current eucharistic liturgy we proclaim – *Lord, by your cross and resurrection you have set us free. You are the Saviour of the world*.

The crucifix celebrates the significance of Jesus’ own triumph over death and the grace. We have life because death was defeated on the cross. It was no longer the end of life, but the moment when life is changed not ended. This is very much the way of St Paul again... *We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies (2 Corinthians 4:8-10)*.

Smashing open the gates of Hell

As the Apostles’ creed reminds us, on the third day he descended into Hell. The gates of heaven would’ve still been closed without Jesus’ death. This is why

these seemingly contradictory words are so true. We carry in our bodies the death of Jesus so that his life may be manifested in ourselves. At that moment when our Lord cried out *It is consummated*, he had completed what he set out to do. He had redeemed mankind, giving us life through death just as his Father had willed.

When we gaze at the crucifix, we see how the Christ himself took up his own cross and was nailed to it. We have the perfect model before us. He told us to do something, and he himself did it.

Looking upon a crucifix should also cause us to realize that Christ was an innocent victim, taking our own sins upon himself so that we might live. Seeing Christ on the Cross, we as Christians should become joyful. True, to see Christ crucified is a scandal, in a sense. It makes no sense that a person would undertake such a horrendous form of suffering, as an innocent party, for the sake of others. We want to turn away. We do not want to look at the gruesome torture our Lord undertook for us. You. Me.

Problems in Corinth

Paul confronted numerous problems in his mission communities in Corinth. He had spent a year and a half with them after founding the congregation in A.D. 51. Despite all his time there, a host of challenges erupted. That should be a bit comforting to us today knowing that even with apostolic leadership things went awry. Jealousies will arise among even the “nicest” of Christians. No surprise when we have challenges. He was writing to them barely four years later in the spring of A.D. 55. Squabbles erupted in no time.

In his letter, Paul rebukes and chastises them for divisions in Corinth. They were lining up behind individuals they perceived were supporting their views. It had become a kind of mob rule, with different groups vying for control. It was far from the Gospel commands of Love.

Paul's response was crystal clear: *I follow Christ. Is Christ divided?* It is not the way of Christ to have factions at loggerheads. They may well have begun over little things but the longer they went on the further they were pushing the community from *the* core of Christian life – **Jesus Christ and Him crucified** for us. All of us.

There is only one message to preach by our words and our deeds. It is a message the world will not easily understand because it is one of self-sacrifice, living for others and being willing to become a servant of all. Paul addresses their divisions: *Since ... the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe (1 Cor. 1:21).* Our very lives as men and women of faith; our every witness to the world as a faith community must embody the crucified Christ. If that is not what we “preach” then we are far from the Kingdom of God.

Preaching = entirety of our lives

How then will the people among whom we live call on Jesus in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news”! (**Rom. 10:14–15**). And the content of that Good News? “Christ Crucified”.

Of course, divisions grow within a faith community when our relationships with others are governed by the way the world deals with these things. The only way to live and to grow as Church is to take our woes, our fears, our angers and our frustrations to Golgotha. We

need to sit at the foot of the Cross on which Jesus was nailed, and in the light of what is happening there, rethink the way we live with and around others. We need to put the Cross between ourselves and our woes. It is the cross that heals.

Christ crucified is the content of the message we proclaim. Just read Peter's preaching in the early chapters of Acts 4:10-12. There the reference to **the Crucified One** is a special grammatical construction. “Crucified” is in the perfect tense. It conveys that an action in the past is accomplished *but the results of that action continue*. Christ was crucified once, but He remains ever “**the Crucified One**.” Indeed, no resurrection, no Christianity. The **Crucified One** is alive.

The very crosses in which we strive to persevere in faithfulness in this life drive should drive us to Jesus. We may look weak and vulnerable to our tormentors and adversaries, but we belong to Christ. To be considered Christian we must follow him into death. **Because** we are baptized, we shall follow Him into life eternal. Meanwhile, we must live under the cross by faith and in joy. *I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal. 2:20).* That is divine power and divine wisdom under the cross.

If that does not give us clear guidelines on how to live in difficult times in our faith communities, in confusing times in a world that will not acknowledge the authority of God, then we must reconsider our claims to be followers of Jesus.

During this third week of Lent, let us spend some extra time pondering the crucifix, pausing to allow the Spirit to take us back to that original Golgotha-moment and from there rethink and reorder the way we are living. If it is not possible for us to pray *have mercy on me a sinner* and commit to forgiving others (dying to self) just as Jesus took away my own sins there on the cross, then perhaps give Christianity a miss. There are easier ways to exist in the world but only one way to live eternally in God.