THE NEW SHOFAR

Nowhere other than looking at himself in the mirror of the Cross can man better understand how much he is worth.

Good Friday

Palm Sunday – the Triumph of humility

There are many great lines in the Easter story but one the causes me to pause and ponder occurs within the Peter saga. Jesus asks the apostles who they thought he was. He gave a precise and incredibly insightful reply: *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.* So good was the reply that Jesus went on to offer him with the keys of his kingdom, giving him far more authority beyond his wildest imagination. Whatever you bind in heaven will be bound?

But his elation did not last long. Jesus immediately went on to talk in ways that were frightening. As they continued their journey, Jesus began talking strangely. He even predicted his own suffering and death at the hands of the priests and Pharisees and his death on the cross. That was not a part of the programme Peter had in mind.

Jesus' reply must have shocked Peter and the others… *Get behind me, **Satan**!* Following him as a disciple would inevitably mean adopting the cross as a starting point of discipleship. What a fall for Peter! From praiseworthy servant to Satan.

But Jesus "loved" the cross

The difference between the two was that for Jesus, the cross was no accident, a victim of the conniving of the Pharisees. He willingly adopted the cross as a sacrifice of love. God's love for all. That horrific cross was not a thing of shame. He had become man in obedience to his Father's will – to redeem fallen humanity. While he prepared for the grave, the disciples wanted the easy road, the smooth road, a place in earthly Kingdom restored by the Messiah. They were horrified by the cross, it repelled them. That the Son of God could chose the cross over a kingly throne was beyond them.

Jesus saw what was in their hearts and understood that Satan was stirring up the ancient sin in their hearts, their empty ambition, their pride, their love of comfort, their vain envy of one another. And this is why Jesus was so angry. He turned to them and assured them that if they did not embrace the cross as he did, they had no part with him. The cross that so horrified them became the one, single, enduring condition of their salvation.

Let us not minimise the centrality of the Cross in human life

Why has the contemporary Church abandoned the crucifix? Many Protest that it is a denial of the resurrection, but I do not accept this. When I look at the crucifix I do not see a dead Jesus but rather a vivid reminder of the very essence of salvation—my own sinfulness that made such an extreme sacrifice necessary and the incomprehensible love of God incarnate laying down his life for me. In the crucifix, I see

the hope of humanity, victory over Satan, the cleansing of sin, and the open door to heaven. I see a school of love, humility, forgiveness of our enemies, and all the other virtues.

When I look at Christ crucified, I do not see weakness and defeat but "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1: 23–24)—the holy wisdom of divine love. And I hear "Love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12). That is the crucifix's sermon.

The crucifix also tells us that suffering is not something to fear as though it could rob us of the fullness of Christian life. Because Jesus made suffering a servant in the cause of redemption, if received with faith, suffering can unite us to him in a way few things can. Only Jesus crucified can make sense of and give purpose to human suffering.

And what does it stir in a heart that loves Jesus to look upon the crucifix? ***Faith*** and confidence to trust in such a God as this. ***Hope***—in the knowledge that salvation is firmly founded on this one perfect sacrifice. And ***love***—a desire to return love for love.

And love refuses to forget the suffering of the Beloved. Why would we want to dismiss from our minds what he went through for us?

I believe in *salvation* in the cross and *life* in the Resurrection

Does focusing on the crucifix mean the resurrection slips from view? On the contrary, it recalls the great gift that the slain Lamb of God gained for all who believe—life everlasting. We fall victim to a false contradiction if we think the crucifix is an offense to the resurrected Lord. Christians believe that the crucifixion and resurrection are part of one whole: the paschal mystery.

When we look at a crucifix, it is never without the understanding that Christ's suffering ended in the victory of the resurrection. And when we rejoice in the resurrection, we are to be always mindful of the fact that it sprang from the perfect sacrifice of our Lord on Calvary.

The cross is the altar on which the Son of Man offered himself as an eternal sacrifice for the forgiveness of our sins. The cross is the new tree of life. The cross is significant, but only because of the time Jesus spent hanging from it.

For some people the cross is scandalous. The crucifix might be thought of as a gruesome sight but in seeing Jesus on the cross what I see is a reminder of the challenge he made to his disciples—the challenge he makes to me to *deny myself*, *take up his cross daily and follow him*. That is what speaks to me from the crucifix.

This is not a suggestion or a good idea. It is a non-negotiable condition of discipleship. Being a disciple means we build our lives around this. I do not enjoy seeing him broken and bloody, but these are the footsteps in which I must follow.

As a Christian I know I am called to be a martyr—a witness. Who I am in life and in death must bear witness to Christ. Whether that means I will literally lay down my life for him, I cannot be certain. But come what may, the challenge made to we disciples is just that: to accept the pain and suffering that can and will come our way because of our free decision to follow Jesus. That is our Good Friday calling. Nothing less.