Good Friday

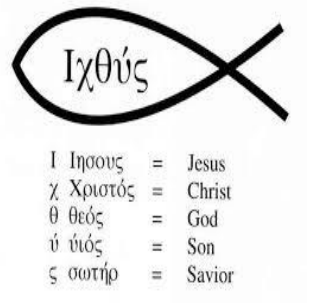
THE NEW SHOFAR

Gethsemane is not a place for hurried theological tourism: it is where the believer must linger, watch, and pray. *F.S.Leahy*

The Cross is the eternal expression of the length to which God will go to in order to restore broken community. *Martin Luther King*

— Martin Luther King, Jr.

The fish and the Cross



There is a symbol chiselled into the floor of a building in Ephesus that was once a pagan temple, but afterward turned into a Jewish synagogue. That symbol was a Christian symbol of a fish -the ***ichthys*** (pronounced "ikthūs"- ἰχθύς), the Greek word for "fish." For the Christian community it formed an acronym for a title of Jesus, one that functioned as a mini creed: *Iēsous Christos, Theou Yios, Sōtēr* or "Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior., or Jesus Christ, God, Son and Saviour).

Many Christians assume that those who first followed Christ boldly displayed the sign of the cross. After all, the apostle Paul proclaimed…*far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ* (**Gal 6:14a**). The atoning work of Christ upon a cross transformed this shameful instrument of death into a glorious emblem of redemption. It is why so many Christians wear it as a statement around their necks today. It is, or should be, a daily declaration of what we believe, our faith.

However, for early Christians it was the fish that became *the* Christian symbol. As persecution of Christians became more frequent and intense in the Roman Empire, the fish symbol became a password shared among underground believers. They used the fish to mark secret gathering places, especially within the catacombs. In catacomb art the symbol was frequently coupled with communion imagery—the fish is depicted swimming with bread and a cup of wine on its back. The fish symbol also appeared on Christian gravestones and jewellery, and marked the homes of believers.

It was used as a discreet and thus more effective identifier for the persecuted Christians than a cross. Secrecy often meant the difference between life and death for believers, or even the church's very survival. When meeting a stranger on the road, Christians would sometimes draw one arc of the fish in the dirt. If the stranger reciprocated by drawing the other arc, the believers could reveal their faith to each other without alerting Roman authorities and spies.

The Cross became *the* symbol of Christian life but a challenging one

There is much evidence to suggest that though the early believers may have witnessed to their neighbours, gathered in their assemblies, and even suffered torture and death in the name of Christ, it was close to three centuries after Jesus's death that the earliest followers of Christ openly displayed the cross. The cross was not considered a symbol one would display in polite society. To the uninitiated masses at that time, the cross was a symbol of shame and disgust, and to display such a sign was to invite negative public reaction and misunderstanding. Paul reflects this common sentiment in **1 Cor 1:23** when he explains that the Jews considered a crucified Messiah a *stumbling block*, while the Gentiles considered the same idea as simply *foolish*. The reason is because, for people in the ancient world, the cross was a terrible instrument of torture and execution.

The thing that made crucifixion so terrible is that it did not kill you right away; it was designed to make a person suffer as much as possible, for as long as possible. And for this reason, crucifixion was reserved for only the very worst kinds of criminals. Because of how terrible crucifixion was, the Romans did not allow their own citizens to be killed by crucifixion, only slaves were allowed to be crucified, since it was exceedingly inhumane.

Cicero, the Roman statesman and philosopher said that crucifixion was so horrible, that the word "cross" should never be mentioned in polite society: *Let the very word 'cross,' be far removed from not only the bodies of Roman citizens, but even from their thoughts, their eyes, and their ears*.

One of the earliest examples of the Christian cross as a symbol is the infamous *Grafitto Blasfemo*, a crude drawing in plaster of a crucified man with the head of an ass being honoured by another man with arms raised, and underneath the mocking words scrawled in Greek, *Alexamenos sebete theon*, "Alexamenos worships [his] god."

To the Jews, moreover, the idea that a crucified man could be their God-sent Messiah was especially ludicrous. The Mosaic Law taught that anyone who meets death by hanging on a tree is under God's curse (**Deut 21:23).** The Jews also considered the display of symbols to be idolatrous according to the second commandment.

For these reasons, during the first Christian centuries believers were furtive in displaying honour for the symbol of their salvation. For example, the earliest Christian symbols, such as those discovered in the Roman catacombs, included such figures as the anchor, in which the cross is hidden in the design, or a boat with its mast and yard in the form of a cross. Other common early symbols were used as substitutes for the cross such as the *Chi-Rho*, the cross-like monogram comprised of the first two letters of the Greek word *Christos* (Christ), *chi* (X) and *rho* (P).

Paul wrote in **Galatians 6:14**, *May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world*. And in **Galatians 2:20**, he similarly states, *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me*. Paul does not choose to boast in his apostleship, nor his many accomplishments. He does not even boast in the resurrection of Christ, for the resurrection depends upon crucifixion. Nor does he boast in the Virgin Birth of Christ, another non-negotiable tenet of Orthodoxy, for it is the crucifixion that affirms the purpose of his birth.

Do we glory in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ?

What about us? What does the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ mean to us? Is it worn around our necks as a symbol of sentimental faith? Is it a trinket in our pockets to remind us how to behave? It must be much more than that. The cross of Jesus Christ is the power of God unto our full salvation through the death of self-interest. It is the gateway to the resurrection power of a sanctified, Spirit-filled life. It is not about wearing it. It is about living it.