

Epiphany 3 / January 26, 2020

1 Corinthians 1:18

“For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

The Power of the cross

Epiphany is a season of God’s power displayed in weakness. It begins with the incarnation of Christ. In His conception within the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus became a weak human being; powerless in comparison to His heavenly state of being. There is nothing as powerless as a human fetus. There is no one weaker and more dependent upon others for support than an infant. This is what Jesus became! In the letter to the Philippians, Paul wrote of the incarnation of Jesus saying, “who though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of human beings. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” Jesus made Himself weak and powerless through His conception by the Holy Spirit and birth by the Virgin Mary. He made Himself absolutely weak and powerless by dying as one of us; and He did it in the most horrible and shameful manner, by suffering and dying on the cross.

I don’t know about you, but I tend to think about Jesus as God rather than a weak human being. Jesus wept with Mary and Martha at their brother’s grave. But we don’t like to linger there long, before we remember how then called Lazarus to rise and come out. It’s easy to think about Him as God. He could zap us with the Holy Spirit and take our doubts and all our troubles away. He could say the word and the fridge would be filled. He could command and we would be healed of our infirmities. And of course, He could speak the word and our dead would be raised. He could do all of those things. He did all of those things. He will do all of those and more at His return as King and Lord. In this age we live by faith and not sight, so we don’t expect Him to do those things for us on a regular basis, but the possibility that He could is always in our prayers and never far from our minds. In His humility, we still see Him through His power.

Even the crosses we wear and display are bright and shiny, not shameful, wooden, splintered and covered with blood. He is God from eternity, but He really did become fully human. He remains fully human for all eternity. Our lessons in Epiphany remind us that in this age He is with us as God in humble form and expresses His power in weakness. When St. Paul pleaded with Jesus to use His power to take away his weakness, Jesus said, “My grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in weakness.” Nowhere is His power displayed more fully in the weakness than in the shame of the cross. Through the absolute weakness and utter shame of the cross, Jesus saves us from the guilt of our sin, the power of the devil and from the condemnation of eternal death. The word of the cross may be foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved it is the power of God.

We wear crosses as a symbol of our faith and of the real hope we have for eternal life in Christ. Although it was an instrument of death, the cross has become the most powerful symbol of life. Which is amazing when you pause to think about it. Can you imagine wearing a miniature guillotine around your neck? If your car was broken down and you were stranded on the side of the road, how would you feel if the first person to pull over to offer help, wore a noose around their neck? If they offered you a ride, would you get into their car? We don’t think of it the same way, but the cross was an instrument of death, like noose and the guillotine. In fact, the cross was a far more gruesome form of capital punishment.

Odd as it sounds, the guillotine was invented as a humane form of capital punishment. It brought death quickly and painlessly. At least in theory, because no one who experienced the guillotine was able to confirm it. Executed properly, the guillotine brings death almost as swiftly as the guillotine. The cross was torture and death combined! People could live on the cross for days, in unimaginable agony, before dying. No human symbol has been so completely transformed in its meaning than the cross. From a symbol of barbaric cruelty, misery, suffering and death, the cross has become the ultimate symbol of mercy, forgiveness and divine love. For on the cross Jesus suffered and died to pardon and sanctify you and me.

Jesus is God from eternity as much as we naturally think of Him in terms of His divinity, the cross reminds us of His humanness. The cross is the ultimate expression of Jesus' humanity, our humanity and the effect of human sin. Sin is the cause of death. Because of sin, all humans die. Jesus' humanness is that He died as we will, as all humans do. Jesus shared in our humanness, so that as the sinless Son of God He might bear our sins and lift the condemnation of eternal death from our heads. The prophet Isaiah said, "Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows." The author of Hebrews wrote, "Since the children have flesh and blood, He too shared in their humanity so that by death He would destroy him who holds the power of death, that is the devil, and free those who lived their lives in slavery to their fear of death." More than this, Jesus died in a way that no human should die. The cross shows us that we are never alone in any of the sufferings of life. The cross shows us that in all things, in pain and in death, Jesus is with us!

The cross is the ultimate expression of human sin; both in terms of its effect in death and in terms of the effect sin has on the human spirit. How could anyone do something as hideous to another living creature, especially another human being, as to kill them on a cross? But that's what humans do! The cross reveals human sinfulness in all its horror! But most importantly, the cross expresses the fullness of God's love and the beauty of divine forgiveness. Again St. Paul said in Philippians, "And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." That's how much God loves us human beings. That's what He did for our forgiveness. That's how much He wants us to be saved! The word of the cross is a message of God's love and demonstration of His power to save eternally all who believe.

Our translation says, "The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing." Folly is an old English word, often now rendered as 'foolishness.' In our usage 'foolishness' and 'folly' are nice ways of saying 'silly' or 'stupid.' If you want to tell someone not to be stupid, but don't want to offend them, you might tell them not to be 'silly' or 'foolish.' If you were angry and didn't care about offending them, you might call someone a 'moron.' On a scale of one to ten, 'silly' would be one, 'folly' would be four, 'foolish six,' stupid eight, but 'moron' is a solid ten. You might call someone stupid if you were really upset and he or she had done something extremely foolish, but we would think long and hard before we called someone a moron and probably feel bad about it afterward. Moron is the actual word Paul uses to describe the cross in the eyes of the world. He says literally, "The word of the cross is moronic to those who are perishing." It's a harsh word, but the cross presents a harsh reality. The cross tells us we are by nature dead to God through sin, in bondage to sin and the devil and unable to free ourselves. Only God can give us life and set us free and He does it only through the blood Jesus shed on the cross.

Part of the reason the cross is so stupid to those who are perishing is the symbol itself. In ancient Roman terms, wearing a cross would be like wearing a guillotine or a noose around your neck. It would be akin to setting up a gallows in your worship area. Apart from the redemption of Christ, the cross is a symbol of capital punishment and death. But more than this, the cross tells us things about human nature and the human condition that we don't want to see, hear or think about. The word of the cross is that people are not basically good, but sinners in comparison to the holiness of God. The cross says the wages of sin is death and that death comes to everyone, because all sin and everyone falls short of the glory of God. The cross says our sin must be huge, awful and hideous if it required the death of God's righteous Son to pay its debt! We don't want to see those things in ourselves, but when we see them, we see our Saviour and receive His salvation. Paul also wrote in Corinthians, "God made Him who had no sin a sin offering that in Him we would become the righteousness of God." The word of the cross is a message of God's love and His power to heal, forgive and save eternally those who believe.

The cross is the message of Christianity and the paramount symbol of the Christian faith! We are marked with the cross at baptism. We mark ourselves with the cross to remember our baptism. We adorn our bodies and decorate our homes with crosses. Christian graves are identified with the cross. We use the sign of the cross to remember the forgiveness and eternal life Jesus earned for us through His death on the cross. The word of the cross is the message of peace with God through the forgiveness of sins. The word of the cross is the power of God to save those who believe. In its dark shadow, the light of God's love in Jesus Christ shines with a heavenly brilliance. It may seem silly to some to wear something as gruesome as the cross as a symbol of faith. But as a symbol there is nothing more expressive of God's love than the cross. The word of the cross is that while we were sinners, Christ died for us. Through the word of the cross God calls all people to Himself through faith in Christ Jesus. There is no sign more expressive of God's love and forgiveness than the cross. On the cross, Jesus shed His blood for the sin of the world; all who believe in Him, receive forgiveness in time and are promised life in eternity through His resurrection.

The Lord continue to express His love through the foolishness of the cross; and make His power perfect in the weakness of Christ crucified for the forgiveness of our sin.