

The Cross

In Short

The purpose of this short paper/blog, is to lightly touch on a view of the meaning of the Cross. This will not in any way pretend to be a doctrinal statement, but rather a particular view that happens to sit (roughly) in the via media.

The occasion is 'Holy Cross' day, which the church recognises on September the 14th. If we were to recognise this day, the next question would be; "what would we do" (by way of a celebration of recognition.)

Background

I grew up hearing many different attitudes to the cross. I also encountered transformational thinking about the cross during my time in the seminary. Short statements include the following.

- 1 "Why are you wearing a crucifix?" (A Cross with the figure of Christ on it.) "I thought you believed in the risen Christ, The Cross should therefore be empty!"
- 2 Bishop J A T Robinson (he was a visiting lecturer at St John while I was there) did not wear a pectoral Cross. (Most bishops wear a pectoral cross. Some are crucifixes, and some are plain crosses) Being emboldened theology students, we asked bishop Robinson why he didn't wear a pectoral cross. He stunned us into silence with his reply. "Well, all the hippies are wearing them these days" "my statement about the cross comes in my books. (Bishop Robinson achieved fame and notoriety with his book 'Honest to God.' The book provided a clear window into orthodox theology, but angered fundamentalist theologians. At a public lecture at the college that year, they turned up in force 'to rescue God from this raving heretic!'¹
- 3 Generally speaking, (not exclusively) the wearing of a cross is more about a personal fashion statement.

Veneration of the Cross

The closest the Via Media Anglicanism comes to veneration of the cross under normal circumstances, happens on Good Friday. Even then however, the primary focus is usually on the passion of Jesus. In Roman Catholic tradition, the veneration of the cross is a liturgical process in the course of which, the congregation come to the chancel step where a crucifix has been placed for them to kiss. Even then, a disconnect between the liturgical action and the meaning of the cross threatens. There is a real danger of the action becoming more symbolic than informed. Archbishop Rowan Williams, in a wonderful little book, comes to say;

We can only begin to get some sense of what it might have felt like to

¹ There was a time when only the Bishop wore a Cross. By custom (not doctrine) only senior clergy wore a Pectoral Cross. In the last forty odd years, the custom has been breeched and it is now very common for the laity to be found wearing a pectoral Cross. It is simply a custom, and not a symbol of office.

encounter the symbol of a cross in the first couple of Christian centuries if we imagine coming into a church and being faced with a large picture of an electric chair, or perhaps a guillotine. The cross was a sign of suffering, humiliation and disgrace. It was a sign of an all-powerful empire that held life very cheap indeed: a forceful and immediate reminder to everybody that their lives were in the hands of the state. You might well be used to seeing crosses on the outskirts of towns or by the side of the road, but most definitely not in any place of worship.²

The Cross As A Sign

These words from the Archbishop make it immediately clear that the cross, as an agent of death, is part and parcel of the violent birth of the western culture over a very long period. Tom Holland³, makes it equally clear that violent death was an expression of divine right among a long succession of Pagan rulers. Indeed the use of violence for the purpose of maintaining the right to rule was an expected and accepted behaviour. The stronger the ruler, the safer the population. In the formative years of the early Church, (200ce - 400ce) Christianity exploded onto the scene with an astonishing claim to authority over all civilisation. What was more, was that a symbol of violence (the Cross) from the secular world of so called earth bound gods, (the Roman Emperors considered themselves divine), now became the hinge point on which this incoming universal divine authority now turned; not by means of violence; but in the form of a confrontation between the old violence and the incoming gospel of love. What our creedal statements affirm is that; God so loved the world, that not even the worst violence that mankind could throw against his Son, would cause God to weaken and rescue Jesus. In the Resurrection, ultimate evil, (earth bound emperor/gods) are shown as powerless. They have been defeated by their own violence. The Cross has become the venue the greatest sacrifice of all time. It has struck back. The purveyors of violence have discovered at their cost, the power of powerlessness.

In short; A Position

If in our practice we engage something which accords some kind of metaphysical (supernatural) power to the Cross, then such an understanding is diversionary. This is the same as the position we experience with the consecrated host when we accord to it, 'more than it is.' If we find ourselves at the margins of credibility, with inflated claims about the nature of either the Cross, or the consecrated host, then we risk idolatry and our affections are misdirected.

Over and against that, we are all greatly edified if, as the gathered faith community, we accord sacredness and at the same time avoid idolatry.

Ross F Downes 3 September 2021

² WILLIAMS, R., *God with Us: The Meaning of the Cross and Resurrection—Then and Now* (London 2017) 3-4.

³ Holland, T, *Dominion; The making of the Western Mind.* (Little Brown 2019)