

A sermon given by Prebendary Nigel Guthrie on Holy Cross Day, 14 September 2014 at Holy Cross, Crediton

Readings: 1 Corinthians 1: 18-24 & John 3: 13-17

The story of Holy Cross Day begins a very long time ago with the Roman Emperor Constantine and his mother Helena. Constantine was brought up in the classical pagan world but his mother was positively influenced by the Christian faith. Constantine began his reign of more than 30 years in the year 305 but he faced major challenges to his authority and in year 312 he came to a crucial battle which he seemed unlikely to win. But shortly before the battle he had a vision saying that he should make a standard to go before his troops and that this sign would lead him to conquest. So he put on his standard the Chi Rho, a symbol formed from the first two letters of the word Christ in Greek which in our alphabet look like an X and P. Constantine did indeed conquer at the Battle of Milvian Bridge and it was a major turning point for Christianity in the Roman world. Christians were no longer fed to the lions, churches could be built and taxbreaks were even available for Christian charitable works which helped the poor.

It was against this background that Constantine's mother in the 330's went on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem on a mission to protect the sites associated with the life of Jesus. During excavations she discovered a cross which she believed to be the cross of Jesus. A Basilica was built on the site of the Holy Sepulchre where they believed Jesus had been buried and a portion of the Cross was enshrined in that building. The Church was dedicated on 14 September 335 and it can still be visited to this day.

Other portions of the cross were sent to other churches and became in due course valuable relics. But rather like pirated DVDs these days there were soon lots of fake portions of the cross and in the mediaeval period the trading relics became a significant part of the economy of places of pilgrimage.

The crusades of the 12th and 13th centuries were focused on reclaiming the Holy Land and its sites for Christians and the symbol of the Holy Cross became important in the imagination of Western Christians. And that's where the story of the Holy Cross connects with the story of Crediton. In the year 933 King Athelstan granted a charter for the dedication of the cathedral at Crediton to the Blessed Virgin, the mother of the Lord, in Crediton. It was known for short as St Mary's Minster Bishop Ethelgar of Crediton when he was seeking funds for the building; interesting to note that they were already appealing for funds more than a thousand years ago!

But somewhere along the line, probably influenced by the mediaeval enthusiasm for the symbolic importance of the Cross, there was a desire to rename the church. But in

an age that also revered the Saints, and particularly Mary, a way had to be found to combine the two dedications.

And so the 'Collegiate Church of the Holy Cross and the Mother of Him who hung thereon' was uniquely and ingeniously named. Of course that's only my theory, but since Holy Cross day only falls on a Sunday so rarely I thought I had better make the most of the opportunity to share it with you!

We know that our parish church has, for many centuries, been called Holy Cross. The seal granted by Bishop Brewer in 1242 to the Collegiate Church is a particularly beautiful one. At my request Sarah and Paul Channing made a modern image of it and digitised it so that it could be used on computer-generated documents and that is the version which you will see on the back of your service books. The writing around the seal is, of course, in Latin and reads clockwise from the top "Sigill Sancte Crucis de Cridint" which means roughly 'The seal of the Holy Cross of Crediton'. In the middle we see Jesus hanging on the cross reminding us of his sacrifice. And around the cross we see the symbols of the four Gospel writers, or evangelists as they are often known. Looking from the top clockwise we see the angel of Matthew, the ox of Saint Luke, the lion of Mark and the eagle of St John, symbols which you will often see in traditional iconography around the world.

Although the seal is a beautiful one I also like the meaning of its symbols. Jesus is at the centre of the seal on the cross reminding us that the life of our church is centred on Jesus and on our worship of him. And the symbols of the four Gospel writers remind us that our Christian life is guided by the teaching of Jesus and the example of his life found in the gospels.

A cross has been an immensely powerful symbol through the centuries but we may feel that today it is not the easiest symbol to explain. We can't get away from the fact that the cross is essentially a mode of execution. Who would choose a gallows or an electric chair as their company logo? But over the years the cross has gathered a rich symbolism. We believe that it speaks of what Jesus has done for us and the love which God has for us. And perhaps the cross has never been all that easy to understand. Even St Paul in the passage we read this morning describes it as 'foolishness to those who are perishing'. In other words without the eye of faith it is very hard to understand the purpose of the cross. The Christian way never promised to be easy and the centrality of the cross reminds us that true love demands sacrifice. We can't both be selfish and loving towards others. There is a clear choice to be made and Jesus pointed us to the right choice when he chose the path of sacrifice. In our gospel reading St John teaches that it's only when we believe in the one who has been lifted up that we may have eternal life.

There are two main styles of cross. Firstly a crucifix in which we see Jesus nailed to the cross. This reminds us that God sent his only Son into the world to show his unconditional love for us. It reminds us that Jesus died as a sacrifice for our sins and when we receive the bread and wine at Holy Communion we recognise that they are tokens of the promise of eternal life. 'The body of Christ keep you in eternal life'.

Secondly there is the cross without a figure of Jesus on it. To me this speaks of the cross not being the end of the story. The cross and the death of Jesus was followed by his resurrection showing that God has the power to bring us to new life. The dedication of our church to the Holy Cross has had a fascinating history but its message of forgiveness, life and hope is as relevant as it ever has been. May we each know this life and hope within us and be eager to share it with others. Amen.