

Holy Cross Day

Numbers 21:4b-9; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 3:13-17

The cross is the symbol of the Christian faith. And so familiar is it, that we probably take it for granted. It adorns our churches, memorials, and we may even wear it as jewellery, though the early church didn't openly depict it in its art for two or three centuries. And that's not surprising, for what we have here is a sign of appalling cruelty.

Crucifixion is a most barbaric form of execution. It was a process that could take days. Pain, thirst, hunger, exposure to heat, and the ridicule of spectators made it a truly frightful way to kill someone. Anyone suffering crucifixion was stripped of any last shred of dignity or social respect. In the Jewish community they were held to be spiritually cursed as well. It's hard to find a modern equivalent to the cross in terms of the immediate revulsion, disgust, and utter shame it evoked. No reasonable person could look at a figure on a cross and see a source of life and truth – let alone regard them as God. Deities don't get executed as a common criminal. They come with lightning bolts and laser beams or speak to us through serene sages. But killed as a criminal – as the lowest of the low? This is absurd.

I'm certainly not the first to make this observation. It's a point made by Paul in his letter to the Corinthians. The message about the cross, he said, is foolishness... 'we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to gentiles.' And yet, Paul says, 'to us who are being saved it is the power of God... God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.'

In our desire to make the Christian faith attractive we may be tempted to downplay such foolishness. After all, modern people expect sensible, well-reasoned, propositions. But the gospel doesn't oblige, for the simple reason, this doesn't seem to be God's *modus operandi* – as illustrated by John the Gospel writer, who picks up that rather strange story from the Book of Numbers about the serpent. Having escaped from slavery in Egypt, the Israelites are wandering through the desert, and in so doing they're given to constant complaining, and as a consequence, they were punished by poisonous snakes invading the camp and killing a number of them. God gave their leader, Moses, a remedy – a bronze serpent, tied to a pole, and when held up for the people to look at, those who did, would be healed and live... The serpent, the creature of death becomes the means of life. And so, John says, this is how it is with Jesus, the Son of God. 'Look at the cross, a cruel instrument of death, and you'll live.' The cross, which is death for Jesus, is life for us. Here is our healing from all that separates us from God and prevents us from knowing life in all its fullness.

The death of Jesus on the cross is such a rich and profound event, that no one account, no one interpretation, captures its full meaning – though John takes us to the kernel – to the heart of it all. 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.'

Here, on this instrument of horrific cruelty – this expression of humanity's dark side – we see God's ultimate expression of love for the world. I don't pretend to understand how that works, just that I know this is how God chooses to act. The cause of the trouble becomes the cure for it. The cross displays human beings at their worst – it shows what sin, and our rejection of God can result in. But the cross also reveals the remedy. Jesus lifted up on the cross becomes our healing and life.

The cross of Christ reveals God's eternal character and purpose. This is the way God loves all that is. For here we see the total self-giving of God. Here we witness God's unreserved love for all people. It's a love that enters the world and fully shares in it – even the darkest regions where it seems suffering

and pain reign. This is the ultimate expression of the power and wisdom that Paul speaks of, and which our world considers utter foolishness. The love and life of God is to be found where it has no right to be – a life that's even stronger than death – strong enough to embrace death and rob it of its power.

The death of Jesus on the cross stands at the heart of the Christian story. As such, it's the lens by which all human experience can be seen afresh. It's the starting point by which we look at God and at which we experience God. It tells us that we may not always understand God's ways of acting, and yet God is involved in our lives – in our suffering and vulnerability – because God knows us from the inside out.

We need to take God on God's own strange terms. That means being content to see the heart of God's work in Jesus' shameful and bewildering crucifixion, an event alien to normal spiritual and intellectual instincts. Foreign and foolish because those who are prepared look at it are confronted with the costliness of love and with the call to share in that love. To accept the love of God, which John invites us to do, is to accept a love that is cross shaped.

As we celebrate this feast, we're being invited to see God, to see the world, to see each other, and ourselves, in the light of the cross, for that is the shape of God's love. So, how might we respond? Perhaps, in the words of Isaac Watts, which we'll later sing, 'love so amazing, so divine / demands my soul, my life, my all.'

*Alister Hendery
Preached at Waiapu Cathedral – 14.9.2025*