

“The Cross”

2/10/16

Ash Wednesday

Isaiah 52:13-53:12; John 3:14-21

Grace, Mercy, Peace, Forgiveness and worthiness are yours from God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

“De Plane! De Plane!” Tattoo would cry out with excitement when he saw the airplane approaching Fantasy Island (TV show in 70’s). Shouldn’t this be the cry, or at least the feeling, when you see a cross? **Everyone loves the cross.** Obviously, this is an overstatement, and this certainly can’t be said of everyone (specific individuals, the Jewish people who suffered under that symbol, etc), but there is a fascination with that symbol well beyond the faithful.

From head bangers to pop stars to everyday people, **crosses are ubiquitous/everywhere.** People wear them, decorate with them, and place them in art. Admittedly, *some do so intentionally to demean* Jesus or Christianity, but *many more who use the symbol seem oblivious* to its origin and purpose. Why is such a tortuous symbol so accepted?

Even for **Christians**, who should understand the cross in a completely different way, there seem to be many **who do not truly grasp its meaning.** If they did, their lives might conform more to the One who died upon that tree rather than to the unbelieving world.

Those who have benefited from God’s gift of the cross, must live lives different from the world around us. The fact that we often don’t, is why we are gathered here today in ashes and sorrow.

Jesus the promised Messiah of God, the very Son of God Himself in human flesh, was hung mercilessly upon a cross – **crucified unto death so that we might live.** As Isaiah foretold, He carried our sins and was punished for them, so that we might bear His righteousness and gain life.

The cross should mean everything to us because crucifixion is our salvation!

What do we know about crucifixion and the cross?

In the Old Testament there is mention of those who have been executed then being placed on a cross for display (Deuteronomy 21:22-23). This practice was to dehumanize and humiliate the victims, but it wasn’t used as a method of execution.

The word for “crucifixion” comes from the Latin word “crucifixio” or “crucifixus” which means **“fixed to a cross.”** The first known use of crucifixion as a method to execute people was with

Darius I of Persian when he crucified over 3,000 in the 6th century B.C. (517 B.C.). **Alexander the Great** brought it back to the Mediterranean area, Egypt and Carthage.

The Romans apparently learned the practice from the Carthaginians. The Romans became very skilled at the execution of the crucifixion. Execution by crucifixion was used for traitors, captive armies, slaves or the worst of criminals. It was considered the most degrading way of death.

St. Paul wrote (Galatians 3:13), "... Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree."

While the execution by a cross was known in the 6th century B.C. by man, it was the intended plan of God all along. Long before the use of crucifixion God exposed His plan. In Genesis 3:15 God tells Satan, the snake, *"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; He will crush your head, and you will bruise His heel."* True, this doesn't show the means of crucifixion, but it sets the stage.

Moses records in Numbers 21:8-9, *"Then the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. And the people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that He take away the serpents from us.' So Moses prayed for the people. And the LORD said to Moses, 'Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.' So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live."*

Isn't it ironic that a serpent on a pole would bring healing? Jesus said in the Gospel reading for tonight, *"And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life."* Long before crucifixion on a pole, tree, or cross was standard practice for execution, it was in God's plan of salvation.

What type of cross was used for crucifixion? Throughout history, unnumbered styles of crosses can be found. They say there are over 500 different styles of crosses. Some have said the Romans used 4 styles of crosses for crucifixion.

Which one was used for Jesus?



The simplest of the crosses was known as the “Crux Simplex.” It was the simplest, most primitive cross used for capital punishment of criminals. The victim's hands and feet were bound and nailed to the stake using just one nail through both wrists and one nail through both ankles, with a wooden plank fastened to the stake as a footrest. Most often, at some point the victim's legs would be broken, hurrying death by asphyxiation. Not probable for Jesus' crucifixion??.

X The second cross is the “Crux Decussata”. The Crux Decussata is named after the Roman “decussis” or the Roman numeral ten. This is also known as the “St. Andrew Cross.” It is a belief that the Apostle Andrew was crucified on an “X” shaped cross at his own request. As tradition tells he felt unworthy to die on a similar type cross as his Lord.

T The third type of cross the Romans used was the “Crux Commissa” which is the shape of the Greek letter “T”. Crux Commissa means “connected cross” as the horizontal beam is connected to the vertical stake or pole. This is, by some traditions, and many people, the type of cross that Jesus was crucified with. It is commonly believed that the criminals did not carry the whole cross but only the cross beam and then were lifted up on the pole. Or, the pole/stake was laying on the ground where the criminal was tied or nailed.

If the “Crux Commissa” were the cross type that was used then how does this verse coincide? St. Matthew records (27:37; John 19:19), *“And over His head was the charge against Him, which read, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.”* It is believed that when the criminal carried the cross beam someone led the procession with the charge on a pole. When the criminal was in place they nailed the pole to the back side of the cross with the charge above the head of the criminal. In doing so it often looked like the fourth and final cross.



This cross is the most familiar cross of Christendom and the world: The Latin cross or the “Crux Immissa” which means “inserted.” There are two or three parts to this cross. The stipes is the vertical beam. The patibulum is the horizontal beam. And, if the Roman soldiers wanted to prolong the suffering of the victim they would add a “sedile” or a small seat. Both Irenaeus and Justin Martyr described Jesus' cross as having five extremities rather than four. The fifth would have been the

sedile. This cross is the lower case of the “Tau” cross with the “Tau” “T” being the upper case. Depending on what sources you read, tradition, and many believe, this was the style of the cross on which our Lord paid the price for our entry into paradise. Affixed atop the cross is a titulus or small sign. St. Paul wrote (Colossians 3:13-14), *“by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This He set aside, nailing it to the cross.”* A sign was often on the door of the jail cell, dungeon, or cross of a criminal telling the charge against them.

What kind of wood/tree was used? A legend states that the wood used was a dogwood tree. After the crucifixion, legend goes, God changed the dogwood tree to be small and not straight so no one else would die on a dogwood tree – cross.

Some believe that the wood was made from **olive** wood which was very prominent in Palestine, or from the **Cedars of Lebanon** which had to be brought in because Israel does not have large trees. Others suggest **cypress**, and others have said based on claimed fragments of the original cross it was **pine**. *Some reports say that these fragments of the original cross could build a battleship.*

Was nailing to the cross a method used? In the accounts of the crucifixion it never mentioned nailing to the cross. However, Thomas said (John 20:25), “... unless I see the marks of the nails, and place my finger in the marks of the nail...I will never believe.” St. Paul wrote (Colossians 3:14), “... nailing it to the cross.” Many experts claimed there was no historical evidence, but in 1968, during excavation of a construction site, a tomb was opened and inside was a young man who still had the nail in his foot.

But, it makes no difference what wood was used or even the style of the cross or the method of crucifixion. **What matters is that it took place, and it did.** The crucifixion was not a cleverly devised myth, but had eyewitnesses.

Two thousand years ago Jesus was crucified unto death that you might live. Jesus paid the price for your sins that you might have eternal life with Him. Unfortunately too many people don't believe it as it is foolishness.

Worse: many who claim to be Children of God take it for granted or treat it lightly.

Some think it ridiculous that a God would use a cross to pay for sins. “Why would God have His own son die of a cross? This cannot be true.” St. Paul answers (1 Corinthians 1:18-31 ESV)

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. ¹⁹ For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” ²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

²⁶ For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

And we might add: Let the one who boasts a cross, boast because he knows what the Lord has accomplished with it. Does everyone WANT a cross? Well, maybe not. But everyone NEEDS the cross. That is certain! It was upon the cross Jesus “⁵ ... **was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.**” (Isaiah 53:5, ESV) St. Peter wrote, “²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.” (1 Peter 2:24, ESV)

“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.” Let us boast, “The Cross! The Cross” with excitement for it is the “**power of God for salvation**”! Let it be so! Amen!