

The Church of St James the Greater  
Leicester

## **The Cross**

A sermon preached by Canon Glynn Richerby  
on Palm Sunday, 24 March 2013

For many years, members of our church's Flower Guild gathered to sit around a large table and fold palm leaves into crosses. It was an elaborate procedure taught to those who wanted to learn the art by Ivan Eames. It was unthinkable – while Ivan was still with us – that palm crosses for St James the Greater should be provided in any other way.

But sadly Ivan died in August 2011. Since then the fingers of other members of the Flower Guild have become less nimble. Last year, for the first time, Palm Crosses were bought ready-made from the church supplier that had previously provided the basic palm leaves. We don't know where they sourced them. This year, our Church Administrator – the admirable Annabel – anticipated placing an order once again for ready made Palm Crosses and did some research about suppliers. She hit on African Palms – a charity that started in 1965 with the aim of giving people living in a very poor part of Tanzania the possibility of earning some extra money. The people's daily work is the planting of maize, millet and some ground nuts to feed themselves and their families. The important thing about the Palm Cross project is that it does not interfere with their work of producing the food they need to live. This is good additional work and I'm sure you'll agree that the crosses are beautifully made.

There is the further tie-up that our church's part time caretaker Francis and his wife Edith are from Tanzania. Francis's grandfather is a retired bishop of Zanzibar. And our Bishop's Lent Appeal this year for our link diocese of Tanzania.

It's good to identify with the makers of our palm crosses.

Having received your palm cross, it will assume personal significance. Maybe it will be put in a prominent place in your home, or be proudly displayed behind your car windscreen – which is probably as much to do with calling for divine protection as it is with witnessing!

I'd like to share with you something of what the Cross of Jesus means to me as we stand at the beginning of this great and holy week.

I find myself noticing accidental examples of crosses:

- string on a parcel
- window frames
- the way bare branches of trees intersect
- makeshift crosses that road-builders use to mark out new road layouts which have the disconcerting effect of appearing as if people have died by the roadside!

In these accidental ways the cross is ubiquitous to those who notice.

A twisted version – the swastika – is a symbol of one of the most evil regimes ever, and was one of the means of swaying huge numbers of people in Germany, Austria and even in Great Britain. It continues to fascinate some who are attracted to the evil aims of the National Front.

To resist evil in all its manifestations, we must have a belief that the forces of good are stronger. It helps to have a hold on a powerful symbol.

The problem is that the cross has become so commonplace as a fashion item that it tends to lose its impact and its special appeal. You may have heard the story of someone going to an accessory store for a cross to wear as bling and who uncomprehendingly asked for a large one without the acrobat on it! At the other extreme there was the saga of the air hostess who wanted to wear a small cross with her uniform who recently won her case.

Therefore it's good for Christians to be clear to themselves *why* we use the cross as an emblem, a symbol, a representation of our faith – and how *we personally* identify with the cross. I hope that by speaking personally, I may prompt you to recognise your own – maybe very different – associations, for this is a matter of how we see things inwardly and spiritually.

When I see a cross, I see – inwardly and spiritually – Jesus' acceptance of his murderers. I am struck that Jesus didn't wait until they reformed themselves before he accepted them. No, even as they do this dreadful, inhumane thing of smashing nails through his wrists and ankles to pinion him in excruciating pain onto a cross and then hoist him up to hang there in agony for 3 hours he prays:

"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

He took this initiative rather than curse them. And because I am a sinner – as they were – I believe God accepts me as I am. I sense that God doesn't even wait for me to repent. Oh, I may say I do – when I happen to realise a fault – and may even mean it at the time. But I find I tend to repeat my besetting sins. Being accepted – knowing what I'm like – gives me the possibility of accepting myself and then I don't have to worry about what other people think of me. The need to be grabbing or greedy or angry diminishes in the light of the cross. It puts pride and ambition and achievement in a new perspective as well. So, for me the cross means profound acceptance of what life brings.

It means something else for me too. The problem of evil is met by the cross.

Now that phrase 'the problem of evil' is a way of summing up all that's wrong with the world and our existence in it – and especially undeserved suffering. The cross doesn't make all the suffering and sin and evil simply go away. Having the sign of the cross put on our foreheads at baptism doesn't give absolute protection against "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" – nor does wearing a crucifix or placing your palm cross somewhere prominent. Rather, the cross for me signifies Jesus' acceptance of the worst that could be done to him – of death by torture – and his refusal to summon "twelve legions of angels" to come to his rescue.

And that, for me, gives the vital clue to God's involvement in a world gone wrong – that God is suffering *in* and *with* his created universe. I remember an infant who died suddenly just before his third birthday and the father telling me – when I went to arrange the funeral – that he had thrown the child's birthday cake at the palm cross pinned to the wall. God can take it – I assured him. That's why, from time to time, I let people work out their discontents and anger on me – even though the cause is nothing to do with me or underlies what they think they're having a go about, because as a Vicar – which means 'substitute', albeit a poor one – I have to stand in for God on occasions.

I am accepted *because* of the cross and therefore I accept others *for the sake* of the cross. That's' what the cross means to me. Think on – this week – about what it means to you.