

First Presbyterian Church, Marianna, Florida

Lenten Luncheons Lent 2007

Reflections on the Cross of Jesus

by Huw Christopher, Pastor

Tuesday, March 20, 2007

The Anchor Cross

Prayer:

Gracious God, as we continue to reflect on your great love for us as it is seen in the death of Jesus on the cross for us so we would give you thanks for all that great love means to us, and for all of the hope and the assurance that that love brings to our lives. Most of all, we thank you for the assurance that there is nothing in life or in death that can separate us from all of the love which you have shown for us and for the whole world in Jesus Christ your Son, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Hymn: “O Love That Will Not Let Me Go.” Stanzas 1 and 4.

Last Friday morning as I was shaving I heard on the television news that was playing in our bedroom a report on a speech which Senator John McCann had made the previous night in Iowa. I cannot quote him exactly but the reporter said something about the way in which Senator McCann had become very emotional when he had been talking about being a Prisoner of War in Vietnam and how on a Christmas Day one of the guards of the prison where he was located had drawn in the sand in front of John McCann the sign of a cross. He had said that he would

never forget that gift that that guard had given him. Some of you may have heard that story more clearly than I did or may have heard John McCann share it on other occasions. Obviously for John McCann the guard drawing that sign of the cross in the sand was a sign to him that here was another Christian. As we have thought together over the past few weeks we have remembered that the cross has become seen as a symbol for the Christian faith even for those who are of other faiths or who claim no allegiance to any faith. So common for us is the cross as the symbol of the Christian faith that it is hard for us to think that it was not until the ninth century that the cross became widely accepted as the symbol of the Christian faith.

Part of the reason that the cross was not accepted as an early symbol of the Christian Church was the fact that for the first three centuries Christians were constantly being persecuted. It was not until the Emperor Constantine became a Christian in 313 that Christianity became an approved religion of the Roman Empire. To display a cross prior to that time put people in danger of imprisonment or even death.

Another reason that the cross was not used as an early symbol of the Christian faith came from the fact that a cross was associated with the execution of criminals. As such it was a despised reminder of disgrace rather than an object of reverence. Death by crucifixion was a shameful embarrassment. That Christ was put to death in this fashion was a humiliation. For most of us today the symbol of the cross has become so commonplace that we do not see it so often as symbol of torture and of execution. I wonder, though, how many people would be happy to wear an electric chair symbol or a hypodermic needle, or a gun around their necks as jewelry, or how comfortable any one of us would feel with such symbols sitting on the communion tables in our churches, or hanging on the walls in front of us when we came to worship.

I do not know what may have come to your mind when you saw the anchor cross on the front of our bulletin on Sunday or displayed on the banner in front of us today. For many, I am sure, that what immediately came to mind was the anchor for a ship rather than a cross and a symbol of torture and death. Part of the reason that the anchor became a symbol for Christians was the fact that, like the fish symbol which we will remember in two weeks time, it was not so obvious. Outside of the Church people would see a common anchor, but as Christians shared this symbol with one another it became a way of identifying themselves to one another at a time when to be known as a Christian would subject them to persecution and possible death. The anchor cross is sometimes, therefore, called the Cross of the Catacombs because this symbol was found marked on the walls there to identify the secret places where Christians would gather for worship. Because of its disguised nature the anchor cross is sometimes called the *Crux Dissimulata*, the cross that is not a cross because it is dissimilar to most cross forms.

The way in which the anchor cross had become accepted as a symbol of the Christian Church is clear from the writings of Clement of Alexandria who lived from around 150 to around 215. He condemned the use of symbols in the church, but gave his approval for the use of the “ship’s anchor” as a unique seal of the faith.

Partly for this reason the Anchor Cross is sometimes called the St. Clement’s Cross. The other reason is found in the use that was made of the anchor in relationship to Clement himself. Clement was the fourth Pope, in the 1st century. Emperor Trajan banished him from Rome and forced him to work in the harsh Russian stone quarries. Clement caused trouble for himself by locating a spring of fresh water from the ground that would quench the prisoners' thirst.

Whether or not the appearance of this spring was a miracle, we don't know for sure. But he was eventually made a saint so it's quite possible the church authorities later believed it was so. In any case, the prison governor of the time was sufficiently upset to order Clement's death. He was executed by being tossed into the Black Sea, tied to a heavy anchor to prevent other Christians from recovering the body. For this reason the anchor cross is therefore sometimes called St. Clement's Cross and Clement became the patron saint of anchorsmiths, blacksmiths, mariners, marble workers and stone cutters.

Another association between the anchor and St. Clement is found in the fact that about 96 AD he wrote about the way in which the ship can be seen as representing the church for its whole business is “bearing through a violent storm the faithful of many places who desire to inhabit the city of the good kingdom.” Such an association is still seen in part even today in church architecture where the area from the entrance to the chancel is called the “nave” a term which comes from the Latin word which means “ship,” the same word, of course, that has given us the word, “navy.” When we think of the church like a ship in this way it is sometimes said that people could not stand the stink inside if it was not for the storm on the outside.

The origin of anchor cross as a symbol for Christianity may well go back to the fact that some of the earliest disciples of Jesus were fishermen and, therefore, would be very familiar with the anchor.

Whether the symbol was already being used or whether the words became the prompting factor for using this symbol I do not know, but as we heard last Sunday in the Letter to the Hebrews, chapter 6 and verse 19 and 20 we read, "We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner

shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf has entered.” This text has prompted the anchor cross frequently to be called the “cross of hope.” As an anchor cast in the sand holds a ship securely, so hope, even in the midst of suffering, distress, oppression or deep sorrow remains firm. Hope provides safety and sufficiently sustains the inner person, though, in the eyes of the world it may seem like a weak support. Poets and hymnwriters have reminded us of this symbol. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, in *Enoch Arden* wrote, “Cast all your cares on God: that anchor holds.”

Some of you may know more than I do of Priscilla Owens who has given us the words of the hymn based on this text from Hebrews with its words of assurance that are found below:

Will your anchor hold in the storms of life,
When the clouds unfold their winds of strife?
When the strong tides lift, and the cables strain,
Will your anchor drift, or firm remain?

We have an anchor that keeps the soul
Steadfast and sure while the billows roll;
Fastened to the Rock which cannot move,
Grounded firm and deep in the Saviour’s love!

Will your anchor hold in the straits of fear,
When the breakers roar and the reef is near?
While the surges rave, and the wild winds blow,
Shall the angry waves then your boat o’erflow!

We have an anchor that keeps the soul
Steadfast and sure while the billows roll;
Fastened to the Rock which cannot move,
Grounded firm and deep in the Saviour’s love!

Will your anchor hold in the floods of death,

When the waters cold chill your lastest breath?
On the rising tide you can never fail,
While your anchor holds within the veil.

We have an anchor that keeps the soul
Steadfast and sure while the billows roll;
Fastened to the Rock which cannot move,
Grounded firm and deep in the Saviour's love!

Will your eyes behold through the morning light
The city of gold and the harbour bright?
Will you anchor safe by the heavenly shore,
When life's storms are past for evermore?

We have an anchor that keeps the soul
Steadfast and sure while the billows roll;
Fastened to the Rock which cannot move,
Grounded firm and deep in the Saviour's love!

Hymn:

“Abide with Me.”

Stanzas 4 and 5

Prayer:

We thank you, O God, for all that it means to us to put our hope and faith and trust in the love you have shown for us and for the whole world in Jesus Christ your Son, and for the way in which that hope is indeed a sure and steadfast anchor for our lives. For all that it means to us to have such hope in the midst of all the changing scenes of our lives, we give you praise and thanks through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.