

First Presbyterian Church, Marianna, Florida

Lenten Luncheons Lent 2007

Reflections on the Cross of Jesus

by Huw Christopher, Pastor

Tuesday, March 6, 2007

The Greek Cross

Hymn: “Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me” stanzas 1 and 3

Some of you who have visited Rachel and myself at the manse are aware of the way in which in our hallway we have pictures of the various former churches which we have served. As I was looking at three of these pictures the other day I was reminded of the way in which the second church that I served in Kinston, North Carolina, had a combination of symbols of the cross. On the steeple of the fellowship hall there was displayed a Latin Cross, which, as we remembered last week, is probably the most familiar form of the cross for us in the Western world. When a bell tower was added during my ministry there it also had a Latin cross at the top. On the front wall of the sanctuary, though, was displayed a large metal Greek cross. Part of the history of that church is that when they moved to that site from a downtown area in the early 1950s they employed one of the leading church architects of the day, Harold Wagoner from Philadelphia. At that time they built an educational building and a large area that was used as a sanctuary, fellowship hall, and even at one time as a church roller skating rink. When the payments were completed on that part of the building they contracted with Harold Wagoner again

to layout plans for a new sanctuary. By this time in the mid-1960s he had visited Europe and had seen some of the more modern architecture there so it is said that the church got a far different sanctuary than if they had built everything at one time. I do not know where Mr. Wagoner had visited in Europe but I was interested to see that he made the focal point above the communion table not the familiar Latin Cross but the Greek Cross which is generally associated with the Eastern or Greek and other Orthodox Churches. While this style of cross was used by the early church it eventually became more common in the East than in the West. It is said that Christian artists in the East under the influence of Greek culture preferred the beauty of the square Greek Cross with its equal size limbs to the more traditional shape of the Latin cross. It is also suggested that Eastern artists recoiled from the cruelty suggested by the more obvious form of the Latin Cross, and preferred to help people to remember the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross with a simple decorated square cross than with the more graphic Latin cross especially when the suffering body of Jesus was added to such a cross to form a crucifix.

I do not know what may have come to your mind when you saw the Greek cross displayed on the front of our bulletin last Sunday or as you saw it here on this banner this morning. I know that one person in the church I served in Kinston told me on one occasion that when he had first come to the church he had never heard of such a thing as a Greek cross. The only cross shape with which he was familiar was the more familiar Latin cross. When he had seen the Greek cross displayed on the wall above the communion table he had thought that it was just a modern artist's rendition to fit in with the contemporary architecture of the sanctuary, and that it really had no particular religious meaning or significance.

Another person had told me that this cross shape for him was most positive not because of any historic significance but because of the way in which it looked

like the plus sign. As such it reminded him of the positive action of God in Jesus Christ for us on the cross. As Paul reminded us in the words we heard last Sunday, on the cross we see “the Son of God who loved us and who gave himself for us.” (Galatians 2:20) In another place as he writes to the Christians in Corinth Paul says, “For in Jesus Christ every one of God’s promises is ‘Yes’” (II Corinthians 1:20) Certainly the use of these equal size limbs on this cross may not have prompted people originally when they used this cross symbol to think in mathematical terms of the plus sign, but, certainly, it is true that the cross is the clear sign to us that God treats us positively and not negatively, and that in the cross we are assured of mercy and not judgment, or forgiveness and not condemnation.

As I was thinking about the Greek Cross this past week in the midst of group of advertisements that Rachel and I received in the mail was an announcement of the 125 years of service of the American Red Cross. As I looked at that cross I was reminded again that for many of us in this country this is the place where the Greek cross is seen most communally. This organization was founded to aid those wounded in battle. The objective of the Red Cross emblem was to have a unified distinctive sign that would be respected internationally. Until that time each nation used a different colored flag to identify its medical services. In 1863, the Federal Council of the Swiss Confederation convened a diplomatic conference which adopted the Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field. This included the use of the red cross emblem. The reason a red cross on white background was chosen is not recorded in the minutes of the conference, so its choice is left to speculation. It might be from the red cross on white background of the crusader's cross. Some say it is the bloodied bandage on a white bed-sheet, like the red and white stripes of a barber shop sign. Others say the red cross is in recognition of early proponents Henri Dunant and Dr. Brere. These

men were from Switzerland and the red cross on white background is the inverse of the Swiss flag, with its white cross on a red background.

Although most conference attendees were from 'Christian' countries, it is unlikely that they intended to give any religious significance to the emblem. One of the aims of the group was humanitarianism between all nations and cultures. But once again as we saw last week in relationship to the Latin Cross in the Chapel of the College of William and Mary there were objections even to this not so obvious cross because it was seen especially in the Muslim world as a Christian symbol. This led in 1919 to approval for the use of the red crescent alongside the more familiar Red Cross in Muslim areas. Over the years, though, other countries and groups have objected that even these are both religious symbols. Therefore in December 2005 a Diplomatic Conference in Geneva adopted a Third Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions, creating an additional emblem alongside the red cross and red crescent. Having no religious, political, racial, ideological or any other connotation, the new emblem adopted was the red crystal.

Once again we have seen the power of symbols in the lives of human beings. The response to the Greek Cross on the Red Cross is a reminder to us as Christians that whatever shape the cross may take, even for those who want nothing to do with our faith, it is still seen as a symbol of what it means to be a Christian. For us as Christians, of course, it is the reason that symbolically we would want to lift high the cross because for us it proclaims the love of Christ for us as seen in his death on that cross for us. We lift high that cross because it is our desire that all the world may come to adore his sacred name and know the love, the forgiveness, the peace and the joy that he offers to us through his death for us on the cross. Let us remember again what it means to us to lift high that

cross as we sing the hymn, “Lift High the Cross.” We will sing the refrains and stanzas 1 and 3.

Hymn: “Lift High the Cross” Refrains; Stanzas 1 and 3

Prayer: Gracious God, we thank you that we can lift high the cross in front of our own eyes to remind us of all of your love seen in Jesus Christ on that cross. We thank you that you give to us the privilege of lifting high that cross because you desire that the whole world may come to know of that love as well. Help us by our words and by our deeds to lift high the cross and so to show forth your love to the whole world for we ask these things in the name of Jesus who died on the cross for us. Amen.