

First Presbyterian Church, Marianna, Florida

Lenten Luncheons Lent 2007

Reflections on the Cross of Jesus

by Huw Christopher, Pastor

Tuesday, February 27, 2007

The Latin Cross

Prayer:

We thank you, O God, for this Season of Lent when we can gather here and focus our attention on you and the love you have shown for us and for the whole world in Jesus Christ. As we move through Lent to Good Friday and the death of Jesus on the cross so we thank you that we can take this time to reflect on what that cross of Jesus means to us. As we spend this time together this day and over the next few weeks help us all to grow in our appreciation of what it means to say with Paul that we proclaim Christ and him crucified, for we ask these things in his name. Amen.

Hymn:

“The Old Rugged Cross” – stanzas 1 and 2.

On the first Sunday of this month before Sunday School began John Milton mentioned to me this article that he had seen in our local paper that morning. The heading said, “Removal of cross from historic chapel raises ruckus.” (Jackson County Floridan, Sunday, February 4, 2007) The article went on to talk of the way in which the President of William and Mary College in Williamsburg, Virginia, the second oldest university in this country after Harvard, had removed the cross from the altar in the chapel. The cross which by the picture looks very similar to the one

on our own communion table had been displayed on the altar of the chapel since about 1940, when it was given to the College by Bruton Parish Church in Williamsburg, when the church obtained a new cross. Even though President Gene R. Nichol is a Catholic, he said he had removed the cross back in October to make the chapel more welcoming to students of all faiths.

Whatever maybe our views on whether or not the cross should be displayed in that College chapel the positive comments from people of other faiths about his action, and the negative comments from many Christians highlights the way in which the cross is seen by so many, whether Christians or not, as the symbol of the Christian faith.

During Lent this year we want to think about what that central symbol of our faith as Christian men and women means to us and the various forms that the cross has taken over the years. Today we center our attention on what is probably the most common form of the cross, namely the Latin Cross. While this symbol may have been used in ancient religions, for us as Christians it has become such a central symbol of our faith because of the way in which it focuses our attention on “that old rugged cross the emblem of suffering and shame,” because we believe it was on that cross that “the dearest and best for a world of lost sinners was slain.” We cherish the cross, even though it is a symbol of suffering and cruel death, because of the way in which we believe that Jesus, the Son of God, died on a cross as a the ultimate way in which God has shown his love for us and for the whole world.

We know, of course, that CNN and Fox News were not there outside of Jerusalem on the first Good Friday when Jesus died on the cross, and that there were no press photographers there. The whole scene was not considered one that would have any impact upon the future history of the world so that no artist of the day felt compelled to be there in order that his or her painting of the whole thing

might become as famous as the event that took place there on Calvary's hill. This means, of course, that the exact form of the cross on which Jesus died cannot be completely and accurately identified. This has meant that over the years, as we shall see in coming weeks, that the cross has taken many different shapes, but still the central focus has been the same, namely that of helping people to center their attention on Jesus Christ, and his death upon the cross.

The Latin Cross, which was displayed on the front of our bulletin last Sunday, and is on the banner in front of us this morning, is probably the most familiar form of the cross for most of us, especially in the Western world. It is the cross that we see most prominently displayed either on its own, or even on those sets of familiar roadside crosses which have the three crosses. It is the shape of the cross that we have provided for those who wish to use them during Lent this year, and at other times, to remind them of the death of Jesus for us.

This Cross is sometimes called the Western Cross, because of the way in which it differs from the Eastern or Greek Cross, which we will be considering next week. Indeed, the name Latin Cross was given to this form of the cross only after 1054 A.D. when the Christian Church divided between the Western Church, centered in Rome, which was to become known as the Roman Catholic Church, and the Eastern Church centered in Constantinople, which was to become known as the Orthodox Church.

Some people suggest that historically the cross on which Jesus died was a simple Tau or T shaped cross on which criminals died by suffocation. Those who argue for the form of the Latin cross rather than the T shaped cross do so because we read in John's Gospel, "Pilate also had an inscription written and put on the cross it read, 'Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.'" Many of the Jews read this inscription because the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, in Latin and in Greek. Then the chief priests said to Pilate,

‘Do not write, ‘The King of the Jews,’ but, ‘This man said I am the King of the Jews.’ Pilate answered, ‘What I have written I have written.’” (John 19:19-22) Those who want to suggest a Latin form of the cross rather than the T shape would say that with the simple T shape there would be no place for Pilate’s inscription.

The Latin Cross is not only frequently called the Western Cross because of its association with the Christian Church in West, but it is often also called the Protestant Cross. This is because it is generally seen like the one displayed in the Chapel at William and Mary College, and on our own communion table, as a plain cross without any image or figurine representing the body of Christ attached to it. This empty cross helps to focus our attention on the fact that the cross was not the end for Jesus, and that beyond his cruel death on the cross on Good Friday we celebrate the good news of his resurrection on Easter morning. For this theological reason, as well as the way in which the Protestant Churches tended to react negatively to all of the images found in Roman Catholic Churches, in most Protestant Churches the Latin form of the cross is that of an empty cross. While the same shape of the cross is used in many Roman Catholic Church it generally includes a corpus, and as such it is usually referred to as a crucifix, rather than as simply a cross. The crucifix is used mainly by Roman Catholics and emphasizes Christ's suffering and sacrifice. As such, of course, the crucifix does play an important symbolical role in our faith as it reminds us that Christ suffered and died there for us. Next week in our quiet reflection time, as we look at various images of the cross, we will have an opportunity to think about whether the empty cross or the cross with the figure of the suffering Jesus speaks most significantly to us.

All of the ruckus and debate at the College of William and Mary about the removal of the cross helps us remind us all of the power of symbols in our lives. The cross may take the form of two rough pieces of wood, or it may be very ornate

with gold and jewels. It may be very small like the cross in our pockets or purses, or it may be large like many displayed on our roadsides or in many churches. The most important thing for us as Christians is not the size or the shape or form that the cross might take, but rather does this symbol help us to think about Jesus who died on the cross for us, and what it means for us not literally but figuratively to stand beneath the cross of Jesus.

I would invite you to continue to reflect with me on what the cross of Jesus means to you as we sing the first two stanzas of the hymn, “Beneath the cross of Jesus.”

Hymn: “Beneath the Cross of Jesus” -- stanzas 1 and 2.

Prayer:

We thank you, O God, that as we think about the cross as Christian men and women we cannot avoid the fact that we see here your glorious love, and our own unworthiness of such love. Yet we thank you that in love you did not consider whether or not we were good enough and worthy enough to be loved in this way, but rather reached out in this way to show us how much you love us. For all that it means to us to live in the security of that love from which nothing in life or in death can separate us we give you praise and thanks in the name of Jesus who died on the cross for us. Amen.