

First Presbyterian Church, Marianna, Florida

Lenten Luncheons Lent 2007

Reflections on the Cross of Jesus

by Huw Christopher, Pastor

Tuesday, April 3, 2007

The Cross in the Presbyterian Seal

Alyne Pitman shared the following poem she had written entitled, **“What Does the Cross of Jesus Mean to Me?”**

For six weeks this year during the Season of Lent

One hour each Tuesday has been time well spent.

We've gathered each week for a tasty lunch

With Christian friends, a very lively bunch!

The soup and sandwiches were oh, so good,

And a table was loaded with sweet finger food.

Each week we sang an old favorite hymn –

We all knew the words to most of them.

Huw showed a banner of a different cross each week.

He gave the history of the Latin, Jerusalem, Anchor and Greek.

Then he told about the Celtic cross – I have this one.

The cross we know best is the one where they crucified God's Son.

I never knew there could be so many,

But my encyclopedia shows pictures of twenty!

Everyone knows the scriptures so well
So I won't attempt the story to tell.
The world turned dark when Christ was crucified,
While he hung on the cross three hours, then died.
They buried God's Son, and he lay there alone
'Til the angel came and rolled away the stone.
When the two Marys went to the tomb the third day
They were frightened to see the stone rolled away.
Hallelujah!! Christ is Risen! Was the loud proclamation –
His crucifixion and resurrection – that's our Easter celebration.
Everyone has experienced sorrow and loss,
But only God watched His Son be nailed to a cross.
I always thank God in my daily prayer
For all that I have and for his loving care.
What does the cross of Jesus mean to me?
It means faith, hope, joy and charity.
It means all that I have comes from God above —
He sacrificed His Son which shows me His love.
And it's this beautiful world, the gift of life, my friends, my dear family
That's what the cross of Jesus means to me.

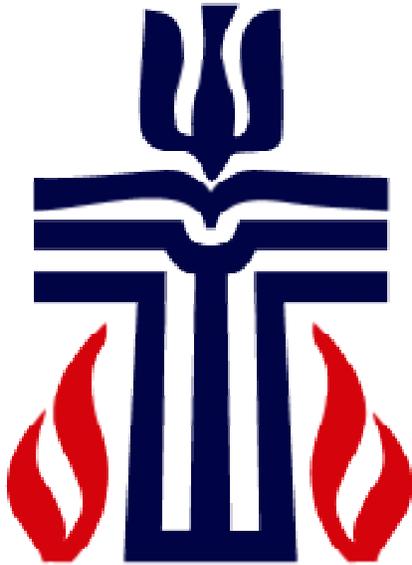
Hymn: “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” Stanzas 1 and 3.

Over the past five weeks of Lent we have looked at some of the forms that the cross has taken over the years, from probably the anchor cross as one of the oldest, though least familiar to most of us, to probably the most common form of

the Latin Cross. By no means have we looked at all of the forms that the cross has taken. But as we have looked at this sample we have remembered that while the cross has taken so many different forms the central message of each one has been that of the death of Jesus upon the cross. We have also remembered that as such even for non-Christians the cross in its various forms has been seen as the main symbol of the Christian faith.

Today we turn our attention to what is probably one of the most recent forms of the cross. In 1983 the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) was formed from the reunion of the main Presbyterian Churches in this country the United Presbyterian Church in the United States, often referred to as the Northern Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church in the United States, generally known as the Southern Presbyterian Church. These churches had been separated since 1861. Our own church here in Marianna when it was formed in 1835 was part of The Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. After the division of the church it became part of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, and some of those who had been preaching here became chaplains in the Army of the Confederate States. Since 1983 our church has been part of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Two of the first committees appointed by the reunited church at the General Assembly in 1983 in Atlanta were asked to give expression to the life of the reunited Presbyterian Church. One was to develop a new brief statement of faith expressive of the faith of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) This statement of faith was adopted in 1991 as “The Brief Statement of Faith.” The second committee was asked to develop a new seal or symbol for the reunited church. Over the years each of the churches had developed their own symbol or seal. Many of us, though, were very familiar with the seal of the Presbyterian Church in the United States. This is the seal which some of you embroidered on the chairs in our sanctuary.



Since 1985 and its adoption by the 197th. General Assembly in Indianapolis we have become more familiar with the seal of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). This is the seal on the flag in our sanctuary along with the American and Christian flags.

The committee that developed this seal was given the task of developing one seal that was symbolic of our church's heritage, identity, and mission in contemporary form. If you were given such an assignment what would you have designed? We are now very familiar with the design that the committee developed with the help of Malcolm Grear and Associates.

As you have looked at this seal many of you I am sure have seen various symbols that have been incorporated into it. Unlike the seal of the Presbyterian Church in the United States central to our new seal very clearly is the cross. Although not so obvious the designers state that because of its association with the Presbyterian Church the Celtic Cross, which we considered last week, was chosen as the model for this contemporary form of the cross. The bottom part of the circle but not the complete circle of the Celtic Cross is evident in the design. It is stated that the choice of the cross as the dominant structural and theological element in the design was very deliberate because as we have come to see over the past few weeks the cross is the universal and most ecumenical symbol of the Christian church. For us as Christians the cross represents the love of God made most clear and visible to this world in the life and ministry of Jesus, and most of all in his death upon that cross for us.

As the designers of this seal began to experiment with the basic lines and shapes of the cross so they began to see in the horizontal section the contour of a book and the two center lines of the cross became seen as the representation of an open book. As such, of course, it became a reminder of the way in which the Bible, as the Book of the Church, has played such an important role in all Protestant Churches and as such in our Presbyterian tradition. For us as Presbyterians we come to know the Living Word of God, Jesus Christ, who has become flesh and dwelt among us through the written word of the Bible. This is the source book for our faith. Where-else after all do we turn to hear the stories of Jesus, and to hear of God's love for us seen as Christ dies for us on the cross?

Beneath the image of the book is the appearance of that which holds the book. Traditionally in the church this has been called the lectern or, even more commonly, the pulpit. As such, of course, it reminds us of the important role of preaching in Presbyterian worship. This preaching is seen as being based on the reading and interpretation of the book of the Church, the Bible.

One of the things that the new Presbyterian seal shares in common with the seal of the former Presbyterian Church in the United States is, of course, the descending dove at the top. This symbol has been used down through the centuries for the Holy Spirit as it reminds us of that Spirit that descended upon Jesus at this baptism by John in the Jordan in the form of a dove. As such, of course, it reminds us of the Holy Spirit as God's gift to each of us in our baptisms. As the dove descends now upon the book representing the Bible it reminds us of the way in which we affirm that the Holy Spirit was at work inspiring the writing of the Bible, and is still at work in our lives helping us to interpret the message of the Bible for our own day. As such we claim that the role of the Holy Spirit is not only important in the life of the preacher who proclaims the word, but also in the lives

of those who hear the word so that it may become meaningful and effective in their lives.

The more general identification of the dove as the symbol of peace reminds us as we reflected last Sunday that God was seeking to bring peace to our lives and to the life of the whole world through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We know the assurance of that gift of peace in our lives through the work of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter.

The interesting thing, of course, in the dove on this Presbyterian seal is to see the way in which the body of the dove has been designed in the form of a fish. While in recent years this symbol has once again become quite common in Christian circles it actually represents along with the anchor cross one of the earliest symbols used by Christians. Both of these symbols are frequently found on the walls and tombs of the early catacombs in Rome. Like the anchor cross it was a secret symbol used by Christians in times of persecution. It is not clear why the fish was chosen, but later the Greek word for fish, *ichthys*, was seen as an acronym for “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior. The first letter of each of these words in Greek spelled out the Greek word, *ichthys*, which means fish. As such, of course, the fish symbol is a very basic affirmation of our faith of which we are reminded by its inclusion in the body of the dove. It is by the power of the Holy Spirit at work within us that we are inspired to make such a profession of faith.

The flames at the bottom of the seal are, of course, also a reminder of the Holy Spirit, as we remember that on the Day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit appeared to the disciples as flames of fire. They also speak to us of the call of God to Moses through the burning bush. This was also pictured in another way in the shape of the bush in the earlier seal of the Presbyterian Church in the United States.

The design of the flames is deliberately in the form of an implied triangle thus reminding us of the fact that as Presbyterians we share a common faith with

all Christians who believe in the One God made known to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This unity with other Christians is also seen in the way in which the half circle of the Celtic cross in the center of the seal gives the appearance both of a font for holding the water for baptism, and also the cup or chalice that holds the wine that we share together in communion.

Some of you may have seen other symbols as you have looked at this Presbyterian seal and certainly there are many others that people have seen over the years. Unlike our earlier seal, though, this present one clearly points us to the central place of the cross in our faith as Presbyterians and as Christians. As such, of course, this recently developed seal stands in the tradition of those other crosses we have considered, and others which we have not had the time to consider this Lent, in focusing our attention on that to which Lent leads us, and which we remember especially as we celebrate this Holy Week, the death of Jesus for us upon the cross. A spiritual out of the African-American tradition invites us to remember that it was for us that he hung and died there as it invites us to think whether we were there when they crucified our Lord.

Hymn

“Were You There?”

Stanzas 1 and 2

Prayer:

Gracious God, as we have moved through Lent this year we thank you for the way in which we have been able to focus our attention on the cross where Jesus died for us. As we continue to celebrate the events of this Holy Week may we come to experience again the wonder of your love seen for us in his death in new and more meaningful ways and then have the assurance of that love confirmed as we celebrate his resurrection on Easter Day, for we ask these things in the name of Jesus. Amen.