

Today is, for us, the saddest of all days; earth's darkest hour. Our precious Lord, our friend, our King, gives himself to be abandoned, tortured, crucified to death; nailed to the splintered wood of the cross. Self-emptied of his divinity, he suffers so humanly that he feels even his Abba has forsaken him. The unthinkable has happened: the Messiah King, the son of David so long awaited, breathes his last, and dies, hung on a cross.

How could this be? Jesus, the Messiah, the anointed one, could have come in power and glory, like the Davidic warrior King so long awaited. He could have rallied the mobs that followed him into a fury of support. He could have done all these things. But no; instead of wielding political power and control, he risked preaching the truth. Instead of the hierarchy of worthy versus unworthy, Jesus taught inclusivity, tolerance, and love for the least among us. He chose this life; he knew these risks; he accepted this death, and did it all for our sakes. But still we are stunned, and our hearts ache, reliving these last hours with him.

And today, in the midst of our grief, we venerate the very cross on which he so cruelly died. I've spent years and years pondering the cross, and observed my own formation as I grew from being barely able to look at it, to reverencing it whenever one crossed my path, to being called to wear one around my neck, to being able to kiss it with both gratitude and grief, especially on this day of all days.

Some time ago, I had a conversation with a very dear Buddhist friend of mine who had just returned from a visit to Rome. She was troubled and puzzled by the deluge of images she had seen there of Christ hung on the cross: paintings, sculpture, illustrations, jewelry. She found it so bizarre, especially given her understanding that we believe that Christ rose and lived again, that we would most want to remember him in his suffering. Why this obsession with an instrument of torture? How could we bear to bejewel it, to glorify it? What in the world was the cross all about??

And so I explained to her as best I could my personal thoughts about the Cross.

I told her that I believe Jesus chose the cross in order to encompass, as widely as possible, all known human suffering. He knew that, in his time, crucifixion was the basest, the cruelest, of deaths, and was the rule for the lowest of the low, for criminals and enemies of the state. Death by suffocation, crucified on a cross, was a slow and tortuous death, compared with a quick death by stoning or sword. Jesus' last expression of solidarity with the least and lowest, suffering on the cross, would widen his reach so completely that no one, anywhere, could ever suffer anything that hadn't already been suffered by him, granting us the comfort of his understanding and Presence through every step of our mortal lives. There's a beautiful saying about his Presence that sums this up: *"Jesus came not to take away suffering, but to be present in it."* We as God's finite, beloved creatures have to meet our natural end – dust to dust. This is non-negotiable. Suffering, to at least some degree, is simply not optional. But to suffer and die *alone* is no longer necessary: we have Jesus to hold on to through every possible thing; there is no territory he has not already walked.

What Jesus did on the cross was much more, though, than even this. Besides his constancy, his comfort and strength, being with us through our life and our death, his self-offering on the cross was given for us for the sake of love and forgiveness, forever opening the gates of eternal life with him. His cross was like a key, the only key, fitting the lock of heaven's gate – which until then had only been openable by those very few who managed to follow the entire rulebook of Mosaic Law. Love, not Law, was the key. Jesus' arms stretched the breadth of that cross, gathering up in love all God's children, all God's creation, into his saving grace. There's a song that I love about the global reach of his saving cross that says, "...as far as the East is from the West – one scarred hand to another."¹

But why, my friend asked, why would we choose to remember him most in his suffering? Why not the *empty* cross, or the *risen* Christ? And I explained that we do love images of the empty cross, and the risen Christ, but the reason most of our artwork focuses on his suffering on the cross is because *we want never to forget* what he did for us. As People of the Cross, we are the ones who have the joy of knowing him in our lifetimes, unlike all the ones that are "*not of this flock*"² mentioned in John's Gospel who, as God's children, are also beloved and saved through him as well, yet don't know it, don't know him. We, as the ones who *do* know him, have the responsibility and the deep obligation to offer our gratitude, our praise, and our worship, on behalf of the whole world – on behalf of all those who don't have the privilege of knowing him in this life, but will - once Judgment Day is finally behind them, and they step through those gates, opened by the cross, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Nothing less than the totality of all God's creation is worth the suffering and death of God's only Son upon the cross – the Kingdom of all God's beloveds, finally together, in peace. God's Kingdom, come.

And so, remembering this conversation with a dear friend, I can say what is true for me. I can say that this is why, on this darkest of all days, I venerate the Holy Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is why this terrible instrument of torture is holy and blessed to me. It is only *through*³ Jesus' death on the cross that we are all forgiven, purified, made ready for our homegoing; made ready for our return to God.

Remember that you are of God, and, through the Cross of Christ, to God you shall return. Amen.

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¹ By Casting Crowns

² John 10:16

³ John 14:6 The Greek "*dia*" translates as *through, by way of*.