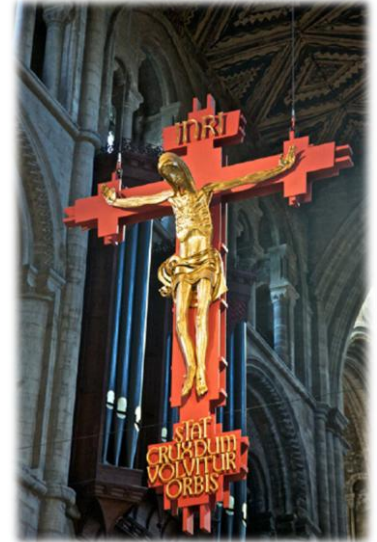


**Monday in Holy Week 2018**  
*Address given during Compline (Night Prayer)*  
*at St Edmundsbury Cathedral*  
*by the Right Reverend Tim Stevens*

**The Cross in a corrupted public square**

*“Anyone who wants to be a follower of mine must renounce self; he must take up his cross and follow me.”*

Suspended from the ceiling in the centre of the nave of Peterborough Cathedral hangs a 15 foot high crucifix by Frank Roper [pictured]. On the cross hangs the figure of a dying Christ which you can see on the service sheet. His head hangs down as if he is leaning into our space as we look at it. This scene of crucifixion is not an object of distant contemplation but seems to be entering the drama of our life. This crucified figure won't let us look away.



We're all to some extent in the habit of learning to look away from things which disturb and discomfort us.

We are becoming used to news reporters who introduce stories especially from war zones with the words: *“you may find these pictures distressing”*. We've seen far too many of them from Syria in recent months. Just as St Peter in the gospel passage does not want to face up to the consequences of turning towards Jerusalem, so we too don't want to face up to the meaning of a crucifix hanging in our eye line. But this figure on the cross, like Jesus in the gospel, seems to rebuke us. It demands our attention even when we would rather look away.

In a little book called *“God with us”* written by the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams reminds us just how shocking the image of the cross was to the early church: *“In the world in which Christianity began, a place of worship was the last place you would expect to see a cross. We can only begin to get a sense of what it might have felt like to encounter the symbol of a cross in the first couple of Christian centuries if we imagine coming into a church and being faced with a large picture of an electric chair, or perhaps a guillotine. The cross was a sign of suffering, humiliation, disgrace . It was a sign of an all-powerful empire that held life very cheap indeed: a forceful and immediate reminder to everybody that their lives were in the hands of the state. You might well be used to seeing crosses on the outskirts of towns or by the side of the road, but most definitely not in any place of worship. When Jesus was a small boy there was a revolt in Galilee that was brutally suppressed by the Romans. We're told that there were thousands of crosses by the roads of Galilee. So when, in the Gospels, Jesus speaks of picking up your cross and following him, he is not using a religious metaphor for things becoming a bit difficult.”*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran pastor martyred by the Nazis put it rather more starkly when he wrote: *“When Christ calls a man he bids him come and die.”*

So what is the call to us from this dying figure on the cross? Surely this is the question for this Holy Week. Does this most public and humiliating form of execution ask something of us? Does it ask of us something which we would rather keep private and personal? Perhaps we have become accustomed to a form of spiritual life which offers us comfort and consolation rather than challenge and cost? Many spiritual writers have pressed that question. Charles Studdert Kennedy who was a famous 1<sup>st</sup> World War chaplain and a household name in the 1920s wrote this after his experience of the horror of the trenches: *"We have taught our people to use prayer too much as a means of comfort – in the sense of soothing sorrow, dulling pain and drying tears – the comfort of the cushion, not the comfort of the cross."*

The question *"to what does the cross call us?"* draws our attention to the words below the hanging crucifix. In Latin they read *"Stat crux dum volvitur orbis"* – *"the cross stands firm while the world turns"* This is the motto of the Carthusian Order of monks, whose headquarters is in Grand Chartreuse in France. In a turning world, where change is continuously present, many look to false religious or populist promises, seeking reassurance or superficial certainty. Meanwhile the cross, if we can keep our eyes steady, offers an unchanging point of reference for all our dilemmas and uncertainties.

And the cross does that essentially by challenging the delusions by which the world confronts change and uncertainty. During this season of Lent our airwaves have been full of such delusions. And in the past few weeks they have reached a crescendo – that threat must be met by counter threat; that power must be confronted by an equal and opposite force; that the path to security lies only in resolution and resilience.

*"The cross stands firm while the world turns."* We can begin to see what this means in the encounter between Jesus and Pilate as described in St John's Gospel. Jesus asserts: *"My task is to bear witness to the truth. For this I was born; for this I came into the world, and all who are not deaf to truth listen to my voice."* Pilate said: *"What is truth?"*

These two figures reveal our world to us. Pilate stands for the world as made by God but ruled by Caesar. Jesus stands for the kingdom of God, as announced by the prophets and the psalms, by Isaiah and Daniel and Amos and Hosea. These are not just two types of king but two types of kingdom. On one side is Caesar's: a kingdom in which truth is relative to power. Jesus, by contrast has come to bear witness to God's truth.

Pilate's famous response *"what is truth?"* reveals the gulf between these two world views. Caesar's empire knows only the truth of Roman rule, the truth which comes from raw power: the truth of taxes and whips and nails and crosses. Jesus's kingdom is the kingdom of the wise creator God whose justice is aimed at restoration rather than destruction. A kingdom which cannot be advanced by distorting or manipulating or the violent methods employed by the Caesars of this world.

On the cross there hangs before us this Holy Week one who shows us a way of living in a corrupted public square where tensions are deepened by tribalism and distortion. The cross shows us too the price that is paid for challenging the dominant myth of the threat of violence or control. Jesus lived out a new vision for humanity, sitting at table

with those the religious establishment had branded as outcasts, sinners, renegades: the enemies of God. He did not wait for them to repent, become respectable, and do works of restitution in hopes of gaining divine forgiveness. Instead he audaciously bursts upon those sinners with the declaration that their sins have been forgiven, prior to their repentance. Everything is reversed: you are forgiven: now you can repent! You were God's enemies yet God accepts you. There is nothing you must do to earn this. You need only accept it.

For this radical challenge to the world's power systems and structures Jesus goes to his death. A world in which enemies are forgiven and the power of judgement is denied to the religious authorities is a world in which the mighty are indeed put down from their seats and the humble and meek are exalted. This is a world in which all the vested interests of those with power and influence are threatened.

The crucified figure in the picture is leaning into our space. He is leaning into the space occupied by the headlines and the newscasters, by presidents and prime ministers, committees and commissions. He fundamentally challenges the idea that there is a private spiritual sphere which has nothing to do with the public secular sphere.

If those principles had been accepted by Jesus, would he, we may ask, have been put to a most painful death by the religious and secular authorities of his day? The spiritual writer Evelyn Underhill in a great work called "Mysticism" wrote *"The prevalent notion that spirituality and politics have nothing to do with one another is the exact opposite of the truth. Once it is accepted in a realistic sense, the Spiritual Life has everything to do with politics. It means that certain convictions about God and the world become the moral and spiritual imperatives of our life; and this must be decisive for the way we choose to behave about that bit of the world over which God has given us a limited control."*

In a speech in the House of Lords recently, the bishop of Leeds spoke about the way the communities of this country are becoming more divided from each other, and how those divisions are exploited by some in the political debate. He said : *"our debates have unleashed the normalisation of lies and rendered too easily acceptable the demonising of people who, with integrity and intelligence, venture to hold a contrary view to our own. We are in danger of securing an economic future at the expense of a culture of respect and intelligent democratic argument."*

We can doubtless recognise what he is describing. Facing an uncertain future, we are tempted to focus on the voices of those we find most reassuring. Sometimes it is those who offer us easy solutions to complex problems, who would divide us into rival tribes or who claim the endorsement of the people for untested policies. Most troubling of all is the offer of utopia based not on policies but on allegiance to a charismatic individual or the naked use of power.

The crucified Christ offers us a radically different understanding of power: *"It must not be so with you. Rather let the oldest among you become as the youngest and the leader as one who serves."* He repudiates force and violence in all its forms : *"If any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also."* He announces: *"whoever will live by the sword will die by the sword."*

I first saw the great crucifix in Peterborough Cathedral at the installation of the new Dean a few months ago. As is the custom on these occasions, (and will be here no doubt in a few month's time), there was a procession into the cathedral of bishops and clergy, of Lords Lieutenant and High Sheriffs, of Chief Constables, MPs and community leaders. I was in that procession too, looking up uncomfortably at the image hanging over our heads. All of us in that procession were part of an established system of leadership, what the New Testament calls "the principalities and powers."

The gilded figure on the cross reminds us all that what killed Jesus was not irreligion but religion itself. The upholders of law and order are reminded that it was not the anarchists but the authorities who put Jesus to death. The theologian Walter Wink has written: "*The law by which Jesus was judged is itself judged, set aside, and nailed to the cross. The authorities who publicly shamed him, stripping him naked, have been stripped of their protective covering and exposed as agents of death....As a result it is now the powers themselves who are paraded, captive, in God's victory celebration. The cross marks the failure, not of God, but of earthly power.*"

St Paul wrote in the letter to the Colossians: "*Unmasking the principalities and powers, God publically shamed them, exposing them in Christ's triumphal procession by means of the cross.*"

What does this kind of divine power look like? Bill Vanstone's great hymn with which we began reveals the way God transforms the world's delusions about power and the true source of our security:

*Therefore he who shows us God  
Helpless hangs upon the tree;  
And the nails and crown of thorns  
Tell of what God's love must be.*

*Here is God: no monarch he,  
Throned in easy state to reign;  
Here is God, whose arms of love  
Aching, spent, the world sustain.*