

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

The cross in a marketised culture:

“God said to him: you fool, this very night your life is being demanded of you; and the money you have made, who will get it now?”

This week the world’s attention has been drawn to a stunning example of the “giving away” of life in the extraordinary sacrifice of Lt Col Beltrame in South western France, offering himself in exchange for the life of a hostage, and now hailed as a Christian martyr. He had fairly recently become a practising Christian after taking instruction as a Catholic. Perhaps he didn’t know until the moment of decision came how much his life had been shaped by the cross. Perhaps he could not have known that he would be prepared to give his life not for family or friend or neighbour but for a stranger . Yet that is what the gospel appears to be asking of us as baptised Christians : that when our moment of decision comes, we too can respond when our soul is required of us.

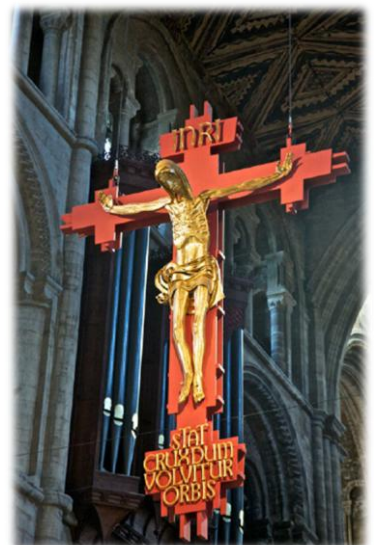
The Gospel passage presents us with a delusional figure, trapped in the conviction that his life is entirely his own property. He lives in his own world, debating with himself, making his plans , behaving as though he were entirely in control . Then comes the rich fool’s shock – *“you fool, this very night your life is being demanded of you”*. What he thought was the path to power and control, led (whether he liked it or not) to surrender and death. A bit like the global financiers who called themselves “masters of the universe”, a moment of reckoning was inevitable.

We know that so many of the values of our society reflect the rich fool’s delusion. We know that what St Paul calls “the foolishness of the cross” reminds us that the way to full life is to give ourselves away. The gospel tells us that, even in death, which is the ultimate disaster for the rich fool, we find life with God.

Inspired by the image on the service sheet (after the readings) of the crucifix in Peterborough Cathedral [*by Frank Roper, pictured*], which hangs over the seat of the bishop at the centre of the nave, we are exploring on these Holy Week evenings the ways in which the Cross confronts our delusions . The motto beneath the feet of Jesus reads *“The Cross stands firm while the world turns.”* It invites us to ask what kind of fixed reference point does the cross give us in a turbulent, uncertain and changing world?

The office of compline warns us *“To be sober, be vigilant, because your enemy as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: whom resist, steadfast in the faith.”* We all need landmarks, fixed points of reference, if we are to find our way.

In his encyclical “The Joy of the Gospel” Pope Francis wrote: *“The thirst for power and possessions knows no limits. In this system, which tends to devour everything which stands in the way of increased profits, whatever is fragile, like the environment is defenceless before the interests of a deified market, which becomes the only rule.”*



The story of his election by the cardinals suggests that the Pope was asking himself those questions as the conclave appeared to be moving towards choosing him a few years ago. This is how he described it: *"When things were getting a little dangerous, my friend Cardinal Hummes comforted me and then when the votes reached two thirds, there was the usual applause because the Pope had been elected. He hugged me and said "Do not forget the poor." Then immediately in relation to the poor, I thought of Francis of Assisi."*

In the past five years of his papacy he has become one of the world's leading voices on behalf of the world's poor. He has been reminding the whole world that we are so much like the rich fool trying to avoid hearing the divine interruption in our lives: *"You fool, this very night you must surrender your life; and the money you have made, who will get it now?"*

Shortly after his election he rang his newspaper deliverer in Buenos Aires to cancel his order. He made a point of personally paying his bill for the apartment he'd been staying in and insisted that he would not move into the official papal residence. And he has not just modelled a simpler way of life but has pressed for it in the global agenda he has been pursuing.

Although absolute poverty has been reducing worldwide, a growing feature of some western societies, including our own is that we now live alongside familiar poverty in almost every community which has become normalised. We are beginning to take for granted the fact that over 1 million people (many of them in work) have to rely on food banks to feed their children. That schools in Newcastle are now planning year round food programmes for children who would otherwise not get fed in the school holidays. That homeless people on our streets are now commonplace.

Yet we know that even a cursory reading of the Bible will remind us that neglect and oppression of the poor are a serious affront to God. In Proverbs we read *"Those who oppress the poor insult their maker."* Not only is God the maker of all things and all human beings, rich and poor alike, but God has a special concern for the poor and vulnerable: *"Though you would frustrate the counsel of the poor, the Lord is their refuge,"* says Psalm 14, and the theme runs right through so much of the psalmody: *"I know that the Lord will give to the needy their rights and justice to the downtrodden."* Psalm 140.

The Bible and the entire Christian tradition are clear: without seeking to end involuntary poverty, neither the poor nor the rich can flourish.

So Pope Francis has made this theme absolutely central to his teaching and his renewal of the Church. In his encyclical he ends by saying: *"the need to resolve the structural causes of poverty cannot be delayed, not only for the pragmatic reason of its urgency for the good order of society, but because society needs to be cured of a sickness which is weakening and frustrating it, and which can only lead to new crises."*

How does the cross cure us of this sickness? When Jesus announced in his sermon in the synagogue in Nazareth that he had been sent *;"to announce good news to the poor, to proclaim release to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the broken victims go free..."* the implication was that this might not be such good news for the rest of us, or for those with a particularly high investment in keeping things as they are.

And so it proved as the cross demonstrates. Jesus must have known all along that this was not a popular programme for change. The essence of it was that " *those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it.*". The theologian Walter Wink has written: "*What is required is the crucifixion of the ego, wherein it dies to its illusion that it is the centre of the psyche and the world, and is confronted by the greater self and the universe of God.*"

St Paul describes the experience in his letter to the Galatians : "*I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*"

He goes on to say: "*Far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to it.*"

The crucified figure on which our focus is set this Holy Week, puts before us the truth that we find ourselves when we give power away, especially the power that we think money will give us.

In our marketised culture the message constantly playing in our ears is that choice is everything. Shopping is essentially about choosing. And choice is seen as a form of power. But if Christ is king, we have in a sense given up the titillating power of choice if we have made a final choice to follow in the way of the cross.

Jesus doesn't ask us essentially for more self denial, as if giving up certain things will of themselves help us make progress. Rather we are asked to embark on the task of disowning the claim of our egos to possess this life. It means abandoning self centred view of the world as individuals but also as cultures and as nations.

The crucified reveals to the world that the real authority which changes the world is an inner authority that comes from people who have lost, let go and are refound in a completely new way.

When I was first ordained, I was somewhat in awe of our diocesan director of training whose intelligence and fluency in argument and debate impressed all our newly ordained cohort of curates. He went on some years later to become the Dean of Westminster and spent the final ten years of his life after retirement crippled by Parkinson's disease and eventually unable to speak or to move.

At his funeral last year he left an instruction that the congregation should kneel after taking communion and sing quietly together the hymn with which we began this evening: "*Just as I am...*" He had learned painfully and profoundly through many years of extreme disability to come to terms with the fundamental poverty of his life, and in his death was teaching us to do the same.

Only by facing up and owning our total poverty can we approach the cross and find our deepest needs are met:

*Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind;
Sight, riches, healing of the mind;
Yes, all I need in thee to find,
O Lamb of God I come.*