

Church of the Good Shepherd  
and  
St. John the Evangelist

2 Lent  
March 4, 2007  
Fr. Bill McGinty

**“The Cross and the Stars!”**

Twenty four hundred years before Jesus, Abraham makes a covenant with God. It is an agreement that sets in place mankind’s restoration and God’s plan of salvation.

It is a covenant that ends on Good Friday. Twenty four hundred years later with the death of Jesus on the cross.

The Old Testament journey, beginning with Abraham as the first man of Faith, is an incredible journey. It is a saga of epic proportions, involving success and failure, triumph and disaster. Somehow, Israel manages, even in her worst days and times, to return to this vision of God’s promise to Abraham, that one day Abraham would have descendants, as many as “the stars in the heavens and the sands upon the seashore.”

There are times in the story when that promise seems so impossible that only a miracle, only a giant shift in the universe could bring it about. When the descendants of Joseph languish as slaves in Egypt and the Pharaoh Rameses II is slowly exterminating them, then that vision and that promise seem to lie broken upon the desert floor.

When the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 587 and the Israelites were herded off to exile in a distant land, that dream must have looked broken and last. Yet, there always seemed to be, even in the worst of times, a few faithful believers who against all the odds, refuse to stop believing, but cling on, even when all hope is gone.

Interwoven with this story of God’s chosen people is another thread and theme. It is the story of good versus evil that snakes its way across the pages of the Old Testament. Like God’s promise to Abraham, it is a vision and battle of galactic proportions involving God and Satan, sin and grace, evil and good in a titanic struggle for the very soul of man.

Theologians talk about the death of Jesus on Calvary in terms of “Victory” in the Great War against evil. It is a victory of peace over violence, of forgiveness over hate, of humility over pride, of life over death, of goodness over evil.

The Gospels depict this struggle in the description of Jesus’ death on that day we call Good Friday. It is a day that ends, with thunder, lightening and tombs being over turned. It is a day were the skies turn black and Abraham’s stars cannot be seen.

But, it is also the day when the kingdom of heaven cranks open and a new force emerges in the universe. God’s Spirit is liberated in the lives of men and women and for the first time we are no longer defenseless against the forces of evil.

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Someone said at the Friday night discussion that: “We are saved by the death and cross of Jesus alone.” How true. But we are not **just** saved, we are also recruited. We are marked by the cross of Jesus. Our soul is stamped with Spirit of God’s grace. We become dangerous because we now have the strength to fight evil. With accepting Christ’s salvation, we join the fight and we are armed to deal with moral dilemma and the corruption of God’s good creation.

In a real sense, the cross of Christ becomes our sword and shield, a shield against evil and a sword that calls us to fight for justice and equality and against tyranny and oppression. Little wonder that in the 2<sup>nd</sup> reading today Paul calls these forces of evil “the enemies of the cross.”

At a very personal level this idea of adopting the cross of Christ as our very own symbol, should have powerful significance for each one of us.

For some time now, I believe that Christians have lost, “the power of this symbol.” Almost as if we were afraid to elevate it too high because it isn’t politically correct to do so. Yet, there should be no symbol that means as much to us as the cross.

This cross should speak to us. It should speak of God’s love in our life, “that he allowed his Son to die and that we might inherit the promise to Abraham. It should speak to us of transformation. That we do not have to languish in the dark side of evil, but that we can be transformed and become capable of doing good things.

It should speak to us of brotherhood and sisterhood that in it we see suffering and pain. We identify with that suffering and through it the pain and suffering of others. That pain and suffering is all around us we pass through it day by day. The cross helps us to see it more clearly and as Episcopalians we have an enormous sense that it is our responsibility to do something about it and bring down a compassionate Jesus from the cross to ease or eradicate it.

The cross binds us all to a special sort of covenant to see suffering and not to walk by on the other side.

Last week the Primates of the Anglican Communion met in Tanzania and came out with a joint statement of the conditions they wish to impose for everyone who wishes to continue to be a member of the Anglican Common.

Those conditions instruct us as the Episcopal Church in North America, that there are certain people in our congregations that we must treat differently. We may not call them to ministry or ordain them as priest or Bishop. We cannot allow them to marry each other in our churches or give them a sacred blessing to protect the love they have for one another and allow it to grow. If we agree to this covenant, we can remain in the Anglican Communion and have a place at the 2008 Lambeth Conference. Our Bishops will even be invited to tea on the palace lawn with the head of the Church of England, Elizabeth II,

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Queen of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales, the British Commonwealth and its entire domain.

As much as I love everything Anglican, I only have to look at my old Christian cross to know that my Christ, my Savior, chose to hang upon that cross and die, that my brothers and sisters might be raised to a new life of grace, in which all the sacraments and graces of his salvation are open to them.

And it seems to me, that it was not so long ago that we Americans were invited to another kind of tea party and our response now should be the same as our response then, 'that we will not put our trust in princes and kings.'

When the Continental Congress penned those words that "all men are created equal," it seems to me, that the key word is "created." Meaning that all are called to be children of God, all are saved by the cross of Jesus, and all may lay down their suffering at the feet of the one who came to save them.

Today, I ask you to join me in embracing this old Episcopal flag that has stood for so long as a symbol of faith and salvation. It rightly has its place alongside 'Old Gory' for their values are intertwined.

I ask you today, to see in its red cross the salvation and fellowship that we hold so dear for all Episcopalians black or white, rich or poor, gay or straight. Two hundred and thirty one years ago, we made a decision to become the navigators of our own destiny; the result of that decision has played out so that we are as many as 'the stars in the heavens,' under a free American sky. We will not and cannot deny that freedom to any man or woman, even if, we can no longer call ourselves Anglican.

Today, it is the cross of Christ which points to the direction we should follow. It is the direction of love, compassion and fellowship.

Today, let us close ranks around the values that we cherish; convinced as we are that the path we follow has not been dictated by any Convention or Synod of Bishops in a foreign land. The path we choose is mandated by the Gospel and the teaching of our Savior Jesus Christ in the Beatitudes, the Sermon on the Mount and John 15. "One commandment I give you that you love one another as I have loved you. By this shall all men know that you are my disciples. Love one another."

May Christ, who forgives all and shows us each a way to the Father, guide our way in the months to come and may we, who cherish his cross, live in the shadow of its values. May it be a shield for those in need and a strong sword in the fight for justice. This we ask in the name of him who called all men his brother.

Amen+

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