

THE CROSS AND THE CRUCIFIX

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in Thy sight, Oh Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer.

When considering possible sermon topics, I got to thinking about the distinction between a crucifix and a cross, two symbols that are central to the basic beliefs of the Christian religion. Actually, the crucifix is a special variation of the cross, but the distinction I am making will become clear shortly.

I felt that I had a pretty good idea as to what I believed to be the difference, but needed more material to attempt to use it as the basis for a sermon.

Since any discussion of the different crosses that are inherent in the teachings of the various Christian denominations, this sermon might be more appropriate during the Lenten season, if not Good Friday, or even Easter. But my investigative juices were aroused, so I decided to do some research into the distinction between these two symbols, their interpretation, the implications of each, and how they are used today. Enter Google!

First I looked up the phrase “Crucifix or Cross” and found that there were 2,450 references where this phrase appeared. (Be careful what you ask for – you may not like what you get!) However, most of the responses appeared to be either writings where the author felt the two terms could be used interchangeably, or they were advertisements for companies selling crucifixes or crosses.

A search for “Crucifix *versus* Cross” found only two uses of the phrase, but one of them had some helpful ideas. Returning to the original search, I was able to find a few articles that were of use. I learned that there are many forms of crosses, and most of them were in use before the Christian era. However, I will limit my remarks to those that are relevant to Christians.

The Greek word for a cross is “*crux*”, C-R-U-X. The specific word “crucifix” comes from the Latin word “*cruciare*” meaning “to torture”. The

use of the cross as a means of torture, or punishment for severe crimes, was strictly a Roman practice. The common Jewish practice in those days, as noted in several biblical passages, was to stone the accused in a pit until he, or she, was presumed to be dead, frequently without any formal trial.

As an aside, this raises an interesting question: Was it really the Jews who cried “Crucify Him” on Good Friday? After all, historically the Jews, if judging Jesus guilty of some crime, would have wanted Jesus stoned, as was their custom. Instead, it might have been Roman sympathizers, or even Romans planted by their leaders in the crowd, that started that cry.

If so, this would contradict the position taken by those who have suggested that Jesus’s death should be blamed on the Jews of that day. In any event, had Christ been stoned, rather than crucified, the symbolism in today’s Christian churches likely would not have included crosses, and I would be talking about a completely different topic today.

With this information as background, let us first consider the crucifix, what it is, and what it implies.

A crucifix, as used today means a cross with a representation of Christ’s body on it. It usually is the standard “t” shape as the one on our altar, although sometimes you may see one that looks more like a capital “T”, without the part above the crossbar. Also, there sometimes was a piece of wood on the upright pole to support the feet.

In some crucifixes, the depiction of Christ is done in such a way as to show Him as suffering, with His head lifted up to the heavens beseeching His Father to save Him, as is described in the Scriptures. Others, however, show Him as if already dead, with His head hanging limply on His chest.

In some rare cases, He is shown in white robes, presumably implying that He is being resurrected. The more common depiction has Him wearing only a loin cloth. But even that was seldom provided, according to the common practices of that period.

Crucifixes are found primarily in Catholic churches and Eastern Orthodox churches, with those of the latter denomination sometimes having two or

three cross bars. Also, crucifixes may be seen in some high Episcopal and high Lutheran churches.

With this understanding of just what a crucifix is, let us consider its use as the principle religious symbol by those denominations within the Christian community which view it as such. Catholicism is probably the largest such denomination whose teachings are based on the life of Christ.

One Catholic writer explains that, to him, the crucifix points to Good Friday and is appropriate for the Mass, as the Mass is the representation of Calvary and should show the moment on the cross. Another author suggests that the crucifixion is the symbol of God's power over death.

However, to most Protestants the symbol of God's power over death is revealed by the resurrection, not the crucifixion.

Many of those denominations that emphasize the crucifix have practices that might be viewed as a form of punishment, consistent with the symbolism which depicts Christ's suffering on the cross. This emphasis on personal punishment, as a response to the implication of the symbol of the crucifix, is rarely found in Protestant churches today.

Those denominations that view the crucifix as their principle symbol, do stress the resurrection in their teachings and their services. However, some may feel that the over-emphasis of the crucifixion misses the point, because it only tells half the story. If the crucifix points to Good Friday, how does Easter come into the picture?

To continue the study of this contrast, let us consider the remaining denominations in the Christian Community. Most Protestant denominations, and most individual churches, display the empty cross, such as the one on our altar, with little or no variation from the standard small "t" shape. The message of the empty cross is simple: Christ was tortured and crucified, as we remind ourselves each Good Friday, but He has come down from the cross, and His subsequent resurrection on Easter morning is at the heart of most Christian beliefs.

While we acknowledge His suffering and pain, we place our emphasis on the fact that, even though He died for the redemption of all our sins, this redemption was only made possible by His resurrection, without which we

would have no Christian religions today. The empty cross signifies this complete act of compassion. We stress the belief that “Christ is risen”, not that Christ was crucified. He is no longer on the cross.

This is not to say that there aren't other points of view. For example, there is nothing contradictory about embracing both the crucifix and the empty cross in ones personal religious beliefs. In fact, many people feel that this is necessary, because they believe that one without the other would be incomplete.

The crucifix alone does not speak of the resurrection, and the empty cross only implies the suffering and pain that led to redemption.

Some churches that have a large wooden cross hanging behind the alter will drape a white shroud over the cross piece of their cross, especially on Easter Sunday. This is intended to suggest not only the death of Christ, but also the fact that He has been resurrected.

It can also be said that the only true symbol of the resurrection has to be the empty tomb. I cannot argue with the logic of this position, because that image is graphic and it is central to every Easter sermon I have ever heard. However, the empty tomb does not lend itself to simple symbolic representation.

On the other hand, the empty cross, assuming one also understands the implied existence of the crucifixion, does provide us with a simple graphic symbol. And graphic symbolism is an important aspect of all religions, not just Christianity.

I believe that the empty cross is what carries the most meaning for me, as it speaks for the forgiveness of sins through the resurrection. The draped shroud drives this message home even more forcefully, as it implies the full meaning of the “Passion Play”.

Punishment has no place in my religious beliefs. “To err is human”, but we must put that in our past and move forward, because we understand that we are forgiven.

So in conclusion, I would suggest that the ultimate choice is up to each individual, as you decide what is most meaningful for you. I have tried to identify the distinction between the crucifix and the empty cross. I also have attempted to show how each of these religious symbols is used and interpreted in today's world.

Our exposure to religion usually starts during our childhood within our family, but it also is affected and nurtured by many others. These may include our pastor, our school teachers, and our friends – and today, the television and the internet.

Over the years, each of us tends to sort through the information we have been exposed to and develop a sense of our own personal religion. This may follow very closely what we grew up with in our home, or it may change completely to be more in line with some other interpretation. But each of us can decide for ourselves which symbol and interpretation best suits our own personal beliefs, without having it dictated by any church or denomination.

Which is more meaningful in your life: The Crucifix, The Cross, or perhaps both?

Let us pray: Lord give us the guidance that will lead us to an understanding of that which brings us closer to Thee. And let all the people say together . . . Amen.