

Why the Cross...why not a fish?

A friend asked one day why our faith has to have as its symbol something as awful and gruesome and terrifying as the cross.

Why not, he asked, use the fish as the symbol of Christianity?

You know the fish, that cute matching of curved lines that graces bumper stickers and key chains?

This fish was, after all, used by the early church as a sort of secret code for Christianity.

If you wondered whether a particular guy was a fellow believer, you drew a curved line.

If he completed it with his own curved line, you were in the company of a pal, and if he just looked at you funny, well, no harm, no foul!

The symbol of the fish was an invitation to worship, a secret calling card about getting together for prayer and fellowship at a time when Christians were hunted down and tossed into jail or even into lions' mouths.

The letters making up the Greek word for "fish" served as an anagram for: "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior."

So why the cross, why not the fish?

There was a woman who, after having been sexually molested as a child for years by her step-father, found as a teenage girl some comfort, first in alcohol, then cocaine, then heroin, to calm the seething empty anxiety that consumed her innermost being.

By the time she was 32, she had reached the end of the line, and one night, alone in a small apartment, she cut her wrists with a razor blade, deciding tonight is the night for this miserable story to end.

She lay there, bleeding and alone, for the better part of two days.

She would joke, years later, having found a way into recovery, that when she was using she was such a mess that she couldn't even kill herself properly.

Why the cross, why not the fish?

Today, St. Peter, the man whom Jesus calls the Rock, the one on whom the very church is built, the leader of the twelve apostles, comes face to face with the fact that he is not always the brave, pay any price, defend-your-friends-to-the-last-ounce-hero that he so firmly believes himself to be.

Instead, today, Peter confronts the crushing truth that he is also a frightened blowhard who just deserted his best friend in the face of a gauntlet thrown down by, of all people, a young girl.

Why the cross, why not the fish?

This past week, the people of Rwanda gathered to remember with horror and shame the genocide that happened in that African nation exactly 20 years ago, leaving hundreds of thousands killed, maimed, disfigured or emotionally scarred.

It was a display of human depravity that reminds one of the Holocaust and the Cambodian killing fields and the nuclear obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Why the cross, why not the fish?

Perhaps it is because only the cross can capture the true magnitude of God's love for us.

As one priest puts it:

"What we see and hear in Jesus' death is not just his solidarity with the victims of this world.

It is that, but it is not only that." F. Rutledge, *The Undoing of Death*, 32.

What we see and hear, particularly in Jesus' cry of 'My God my God why have you abandoned me,' is Jesus' identification in his cross not only with the innocent victims of the world, of which Jesus is surely one, but also his identification with the torturers.

It seems that Jesus hangs from the cross not only to redeem, to bring home, the victim of sexual abuse, the frightened apostle, the maimed and the dead, but also the one who perpetuates the sexual abuse, the one who enjoys persecuting others, and the ones who themselves maim and kill.

Just last week the news ran a story of a young mother originally from the Big Island.

She had moved to the Pacific Northwest and for reasons beyond comprehension beat her 4 year old boy to death because somehow she believed he was "gay."

And yet, Jesus hangs from the cross to redeem her too, to love her too, to return her to the person she was meant to be in God's eyes.

This is the scandal of the cross, that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.

It is the scandal of the cross, but it is also the power of the cross.

Through the cross, God throws out all just desserts, God tosses into the trash heap any notion that we might earn our own salvation, and God brings us face to face with who we truly are: sometimes good, sometimes evil, and always in need of God's mercy, always in need of God's forgiveness.

It's why we are dead wrong when we decide to pick and choose who should be part of our community of faith: deciding who measures up to our standards and who doesn't, because in the only eyes that count, God's eyes, we none of us measure up, and yet we are all of us loved, welcomed, accepted.

And so "what Jesus assumes on the cross is not only the suffering of the innocents but also the wickedness of those who inflict the suffering...." Id. at 33.

And in the midst of all of this, Jesus says, "Father, forgive, they don't know what they are doing."

"This means that Jesus, in his death, makes himself one, not only with **my pain**, but also with **my sin** — because I myself and you yourselves, and all of us ourselves, are sometimes victims of others and sometimes torturers of others and sometimes both." Id., 33.

Seeing ourselves in this light is never easy.

Many will spend a lifetime running from this truth, desperate to maintain an image that God knows is just that: an image.

But then, perhaps, something happens.

A crisis happens, a death, a divorce, a diagnosis of cancer or heart failure, a child who is a crushing mess, and we are somehow shaken enough to look deeply into that mirror of our reality, to see ourselves, if only for an instant, as God sees us, and in

that miracle of insight, Jesus whispers, "you are not far from the kingdom of God." Mk. 12:34.

Why the cross and not the fish?

Actually, the question presents a false choice.

For God can and does approach us in both cross and fish.

There is no doubt that God is present to us in our fellowship, in our celebrations here together, as we break bread and share wine with one another — in the gatherings symbolized by the fish, God is most certainly in our midst.

But at the cross, God meets us not only in our frivolity, not only in our community, not only in our abundance, but at the cross, God meets us in our deepest pain, in our most isolating aloneness, in our most desperate poverty and need.

At the cross, in the darkness that invades every one of our lives from time to time, we find a friend who knows the road, and who promises never to abandon us.

On the cross, the seemingly once distant God gets down and dirty with you and me; he gets right into the mud and muck of human life, of human death, of our harsh and relentless judgments of one another and of our contempt and fear, and somehow, in ways we will never understand this side of the kingdom, manages to take it all up and transform all of it into something pure, something sweet, even something holy.

At the intersection of suffering and love there is not darkness, there is not meaninglessness, there is not the void, but rather, at the intersection of suffering and love..... is God.

That gal who tried suicide would years later, clean and sober, find herself with a diagnosis of terminal cancer.

What she came to find in that that grim diagnosis was a door that opened straight into the heart of God.

She came to believe that the God who sat with her as blood dripped from her sliced wrists so many years ago was also with her throughout cancer's invasion and this God remained with her until the end here and this God remains with her into the next life: this God who is always present, who is always patient, who never fails to keep his word.

Just so, St. Peter would find himself at the end of his life, leaving Rome on foot only to be told in the vision to turn back.

The time has come and he will now be taken to a place he would rather not go by a people he would rather not know.

In his martyrdom Peter will fulfill his bold words spoken at today's supper and indeed die for his Lord.

And today, the people of Rwanda come together, speak with one another, and search for ways to forgive and to be reconciled with one another.

It is on the cross that we find the transforming power of the God in whom we live and move and have our being.

And if it's not too late for that gal with sliced wrists or for that sometime blowhard Peter or for the people of Rwanda, then perhaps it's not too late for you and me to meet this God who heals the sick, who gives sight to the blind, who raises the dead to life.

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