

---

## Sunday after the Exultation of the Holy Cross 2020

*Galatians 2:16-20 & Mark 8:34-9:1*

---

Earlier this week, Jane went to the doctor's office because she felt some awful stomach pains. They ran tests, took some blood, and told her they'd contact her in a few days. Jane assumed the pain was at least partially due to stress and depression. Three weeks ago, at 35, her husband, the love of her life, died from a heart attack. And now this medical problem appears. "Oh God," she cried, "Why me?" The pain was almost unbearable, and she was at the point of giving up. She took her husband's handgun, put it on the kitchen table and stared at it, contemplating. As she sat there, suddenly the phone rang. It was the doctor. He said, "Jane, you're perfectly healthy. You're pregnant."

How many here can say they had a bad day or a difficult moment this week when you felt pain and despair? And when you felt this way, did you ask, why me, why now or just why? Was this question directed towards another person, towards yourself or God? Much help and answers to these questions are in today's gospel reading (Mark 8:34-9:1). In one passage, Jesus states, "Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me" (v.34).

The logic of Christ cross contradicts everything the world teaches about successful and prosperous living. Strange as it may seem, those who live under the shadow of the cross can receive only by giving, win only by losing, and live only by dying. Mark 8:27-35

Many Christians look for the path of least resistance. When Christianity becomes too comfortable, it's hard to take the cross seriously. The history of the church reveals how Christians have always tried to make faith simple and easy. We have an excellent example of that in the paragraphs that lead to today's reading. Peter had just confessed that Jesus was the Messiah. Then Jesus spoke to them about the coming days of His suffering, rejection, and His death. The information shocked His disciples. So, Peter took Jesus aside and rebuked Him. In response, Jesus turned on Peter and said, "Get out of my sight, you Satan!" Then Jesus gathered all the disciples and said, "If any wish to come after me, they must deny themselves, take up their crosses, and follow in my steps." Jesus gives this invitation to all of us.

The cross did not mean to be for Christ alone but also his followers. The cross stands at the center of the Christian faith for several reasons. First, it reveals the true nature of sin. Sin is not an invention of religion. It is a real fact of human life. Sin is why our governments spend millions of dollars on police officers, jails, law courts and prisons. Why would nations of the world driven themselves into bankruptcy buying or making machines to kill people? Sin is the most profound problem of humanity, even without religion.

We can see the true nature of sin at the cross. Sin took the purest of our kind, beat Him with a whip, crowned Him with thorns, nailed Him to a cross, and mocked Him as He died. Sin is terrible enough in what it does to the guilty, but at its worst, what the innocent must endure. The cross has always symbolized this. The sin that crucified Jesus is with us today. It results from pride, greed, hatred, cowardice, and selfishness. These reasons have not changed since the crucifixion of Jesus.

The cross also reveals the power of sacrificial living. During the Persian Gulf War twenty years ago, news coverage showed a rare scene. American and Iraqi foot soldiers were shooting at each other across an expanse of sand. Trapped between them, in the line of

fire, was a young Iraqi boy. He was trying to hide in a low spot to avoid the bullets. At the risk of his own life, an American soldier went out to the boy and brought him back to safety. It was a moving sight. Some wondered what possessed him to do this dangerous act when he had responsibilities of his own to his family? The boy he helped was a foreigner. Yet the soldier did what his heart told him to do. We admire such sacrificial acts, for they display the most potent force in humankind's moral life.

Are we trying to make life too easy? We construct beautiful buildings, perform masterful music for worship, and sit on comfortable pews. But it is not the church's beauty alone that makes the world sit up and take notice. It requires the cross to do that. We put the cross on our church steeples, but the cross belongs in the middle of life's struggles. The cross needs the action of sacrificial living. There can be no genuine Christianity without it.

The cross is central to our faith because it reveals the way of true faith. Jesus put His faith, not in power and might, but a loving God and self-giving love. The cross still stands as a symbol of godliness and genuine goodness. The Church cannot face this world at a lower level of devotion. The way of the cross is the only way.

Amen!