

Palm Sunday

Today – and on Good Friday – we hear and reflect on the Passion and death of the Lord. The word ‘passion’ comes from the Latin *pati*, which means to suffer; and the word ‘suffer’ comes from the Latin *ferre*, which means to bear or to carry.

Passion has many aspects and it can be pleasurable or painful:

as pleasure it can be physical, in passion between lovers; or intellectual and emotional, in a passion for music or sport or cooking; and as pain it can be physical in illness, or intellectual and emotional in grief, depression or heartache. All these experiences, good or bad, welcome or otherwise, are ours to bear, to carry. Isaiah says: ‘Ours were the weaknesses he carried, ours were the sorrows he bore’ The Lord *bears* and *carries* our infirmities by walking the path that leads to the cross.

The cross is at the centre of the Passion. It is the symbol above all others of Christian faith. It is also an image that is rich with all kinds of meaning – spiritual, psychological and religious. For the early Christians the cross very quickly became a mystical symbol and they saw it everywhere around them: in the flight of birds, in the sails of a ship, in the figure of a human being with outstretched arms, in the heavenly constellations. For them, the cross pointed to a

transcendent reality that manifested itself everywhere for those with eyes of faith.

The cross is a mandala: a mandala is a fourfold concentric shape that is found in all the world's great religious imagery. It is symbol that is deeply embedded in the collective psyche of humanity.

Vertically it joins heaven to earth and the arms of Christ stretched out on it embrace the whole world; it is also a symbol of wholeness and completion because it includes every cardinal direction – north, east, south and west. In John's gospel, it says: "Jesus, knowing everything had been completed, said: 'It is accomplished.'" (18:28-30). So we have this idea of fullness, of nothing left undone, of everything included. Gregory of Nyssa, a 4th century Cappadocian Church father, said that God fills all things everywhere with himself, and we can see this in the cross, because: "... it is divided into four parts, so there are four projections, four in number from the central point, where the whole converges on itself..."

Nothing and no one is excluded from the embrace of this wholeness and completion: not the living not the dead, not the sinner, not the saint. This is why it is the ultimate assurance of salvation. With such an assurance, none of us need be afraid.

The cross is also a powerful symbol of the little passions we face every day of our lives: the passing cloud of depression, the shock of bad news, distress at the state of the world, anxiety about one's loved ones, fear of loneliness, of pain, of

loss. These things we must inevitably suffer: that is, we must bear and carry them, as the Lord bore and carried his suffering. The cross, moreover, shows us how: because between the two outstretched arms is the centre, where Christ's heart is – and in that heart-centre we find stillness and peace between the pull of extremes. This conflict of opposites is within all of us:

the love we *should* have and the coldness we *do* have; the courage we *need* and the fear we *suffer*; the kindness we *ought* to show and the selfishness we *actually* show. If we bear this pull of opposites within ourselves, if we carry it with patience and trust, we will find ourselves walking between them and not torn apart by them. More than this: we will be born into a higher, more authentic way of living. We know this because we know that crucifixion is followed by resurrection.

The cross, in the end, was made from a tree: the Tree of Life.