

Homily preached by Reverend Mother Mary Luke CHC at the Installation of Fr Kit Dunkley as Master General and Fr Nicholas Spicer as Master Provincial of the Society of the Holy Cross 28th February 2013.

I expect most of you know the connection between SSC and the Community of the Holy Cross. You were founded in 1855 by Fr Charles Lowder. Two years later, when he had moved to be mission priest at St George in the East, and realising men couldn't do everything, he sent out a request for a woman to found a religious community to work with him and his team. Elizabeth Neale heard the call and on 14th April 1857 moved to Wapping with two other women. So it is a special pleasure to be here today sharing in the occasion of the Installation of Fr Lowder's successors, Fr Kit Dunkley as Master General and Fr Nicholas Spicer as Master Provincial of the Society of the Holy Cross.

Our shared dedication is that of the Holy Cross, so perhaps it is not much of a surprise when I say it is the theme of this homily. Your motto is "In this sign, conquer"; ours is; "The way of the cross is the way of light". The cross shines forth in mystic glow.

The Cross. A particularly barbaric method of execution carried out by the Roman authorities to punish malefactors and to act as a deterrent to others. No need to go into the details of the suffering and torment experienced by those who were crucified. And yet the cross became the symbol of Christianity, as the means whereby God the Father accomplished his purpose of reconciling his creation to himself through the sacrifice of his Son. Jesus offered himself up as a sacrifice to

atone for the sins of the whole world, past present and future, to destroy death and he did it once and for all. But we are privileged to share in Jesus' saving work. As St Paul says: 'I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, the Church'. That is why you are priests and I and my Sisters are nuns---to share in Christ's afflictions for the sake of the Church. And so we are to take up our cross daily and follow Christ.

But what is a cross? I think it is something which is laid upon us which is too heavy for us to bear and which seems to be detrimental to our spiritual life. A cross is not glamorous! There is a sense of 'this ought not to be; it is all wrong' about it. Even the great St Teresa of Avila experienced this and she was not above complaining to God about it. In the Book of the Foundations she wrote: Oh my Lord. How certain it is that you will repay with great trials those who do you some service. But just at this time we had no desire for this favour for it seemed to make everything impossible.

I think most of us will admit to having received 'favours' from God, whether it is the need always to think about money, an illness in ourselves or someone near to us which absorbs a lot of time and energy; dealing with divisions in the PCC, being accused of wrongdoing, often by two opposing sides, misunderstandings by those in authority---the list is endless. All these seem to hinder or prevent what we see as our true work---preaching, teaching, celebrating the sacraments, pastoral

work, growing into deeper union with God through prayer, so that lives are changed and the Kingdom of God realised here on earth. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on EARTH as in heaven. That is what we think we should be doing but people, events get in the way.

So why does Jesus say we should pick up our cross daily and follow him? His whole life, of course, illustrates the cross, not just when he is actually crucified. He teaches the disciples and seems to be getting his message across. "Who do people say I am?" "You are the Christ, the Son of God". "You are right, Peter. Now do you realise what that involves?" No. Time and again, as he carried out his ministry he was misunderstood, rejected, actively lured into traps designed to make him incriminate himself, and finally betrayed by one of his closest friends and executed after a parody of a trial. And then, on the cross, he took all the sin of the world into himself. Evil always tries to divide, destroy, make rotten, but Jesus on the cross couldn't be divided. He was fixed there by the nails. The tension he experienced threatened to tear him apart but in love he stayed there, and died. Death cannot kill love, though, and Jesus, being Love, was raised from the dead, by his death defeating death. The essence of sin and evil died with him and in our turn, it is for us to accept and stay on our crosses in order to kill off more evil.

The way of the cross **is** the way of light and in this sign we **do** conquer. It is the sign that the only thing that defeats evil is self-sacrificing love. Yes these trials and tribulations **are** favours from God, permitted by him as they strip us of self-illusion and bring us to a state of naked dependency on God who can then work through us. We are like conduits, made to convey streams of water which will give life to

wherever it flows. But the channel is blocked up by debris of all kinds. One of the functions of crosses is to get rid of the debris so that the water can flow freely again. Or, to change the metaphor, we are magnifying glasses which focus the beam of God's love where the need is greatest. If the glass is dirty there is less light getting through.

The channel has to be cleared, the glass cleaned but we can't do it on our own. By and large most of us want to be happy. Happiness is not possible, though, while we are the centre of our own lives. We want to be in control of our own lives, be captains of our ship, the masters of our soul. But we're not. God is. Sooner or later he has to break down all our false ideas of ourselves, strip away the illusions and bring us to acknowledge that we are not God and of ourselves we can do nothing. The way God does this is the Cross. The paradox of Christianity is that if everything seems to be going smoothly, the chances are that we are stuck, not making any progress, and when things seem to be going all wrong we are forging ahead. The foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

The cross brings us to our knees in prayer. Sometimes the prayer is "Take this cross away", sometimes it is "Give me the strength to cope" but the cross is always hard. About 20 years ago Fr Tony Prockter was our Warden. One day I was having a good old moan to him about everything I perceived as wrong and after listening to me patiently for a while he said, "Sister, you are a member of the Community of the Holy Cross. What on earth else do you expect?" I have often taken comfort from the words of Dom John Chapman, one time Abbot of Downside. He wrote: "We suffer best when we resent and hate the suffering and

feel we are bearing it badly. If one **felt** one was suffering patiently and for God, one wouldn't suffer so much. It is the feeling of impatience and division from God which **is** suffering, and it is most meritorious."

So Fr Kit and Fr Nicholas, you are both about to enter even more deeply into this mystery of the cross being light and being the weapon with which we conquer. But there is more to being Masters of the SSC than that. The gospel reading was from John 10—the Good Shepherd. At Costock we are the Benedictine Community of the Holy Cross and here I will bring in a strand of our CHC life; that of the Holy Rule of St Benedict. A few years back, when the diocese of Southwell was looking for a new bishop, Christina Baxter was on the Vacancy-in See committee. She was with us for a Quiet Day and after dinner we read, as is our custom, the portion of the Holy Rule appointed for the day. It was on 'The Election of an Abbot'.

When we left the refectory I said to Christina, "Not a bad description of the qualities needed in a bishop" and she replied "Or in a Principal of a theological college." Or, we may add, in a Master General or Provincial of the SSC.

Here are some points from the reading: "Let him recognise that his goal must be profit for the monks, not pre-eminence for himself. He should always let mercy triumph over judgement, so that he too may win mercy. He should use prudence in correcting otherwise by rubbing too hard he may break the vessel. He is to distrust his own frailty and remember not to crush the bruised reed. Let him strive to be loved rather than feared.

“Excitable, anxious, extreme, obstinate, jealous or over suspicious he must not be. He should be discerning and moderate, bearing in mind the discretion of holy Jacob, who said: If I drive my flocks too hard, they will all die in a single day.

“He must so arrange everything that the strong have something to yearn for and the weak nothing to run from.”

So Fathers, you have a high ideal to aim for and no doubt at many times you will fail and feel the weight of the cross very heavily. Go on, knowing that you have the prayers of all your brothers in Christ, (and sisters) and take up your crosses. There is a purpose in them so do not fear. Have you ever noticed that when God says, “Fear not, for I am with you”, he usually has a particularly hard task in mind for you? ‘But we depend upon a God who demands responsible action in a bold venture of faith and who promises forgiveness and consolation to the man who becomes a sinner in that venture’. (Bonhoeffer)

At the end of the Holy Rule come these words which to my mind give a simple recipe for anyone trying to live a Christian life and they provide a suitable conclusion to this address:

‘Let them cherish fraternal charity with chaste love, fear God, love their brothers with sincere and humble affection, and prefer nothing whatever to Christ. And may he bring us all alike to life everlasting’ Amen

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