

Mount Olive Lutheran Church  
5327 W. Washington Blvd.  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53208-1798

Holy Cross Sunday  
September 14, 2008  
1 Corinthians 1:18-25

## *“The Cross and the Crucified”*

by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

### Introduction

The bells that you heard at the opening of the service were a little different than usual. Our new carillon allows us to play different recordings and those bells were of the Kreuzkirche (that is, the Church of the Holy Cross) in Dresden, Germany. On this Sunday, which is Holy Cross Day, what could be more fitting? For the first time in 5 years, Holy Cross Day falls on a Sunday. The celebration of this day goes back to the supposed discovery of a portion of the cross of Christ by Helena, the mother of the Emperor Constantine, on September 14, 320 A.D. And of course, there were many supposed relics of the “true cross” in the medieval church. In fact the aforementioned church in Dresden was renamed from St. Nicolas to the Cross church because of its possession of a relic of the cross in 1388. Martin Luther, would in fact comment that there were enough relics of the cross in Germany to build a good sized house. Unfortunately, the relics became more important than the true message. Whatever the origins of the day, it is important that we pause for a few moments and consider again the importance of the cross of Christ. So today we consider the importance of the cross of Christ under the theme “The Cross and the Crucified” which is based on the Epistle for this day.

#### I. The Folly of the Cross

“The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing ...” These words which begin the Epistle should hit us right between the eyes. St. Paul minces no words. The message of the cross is truly foolishness to the world, to the “wise and learned” of the world. It is sheer folly. In Greek, the word used here is “moria” which is the root of the English word “moronic”. And isn’t that indeed how some people feel about the cross--the word of the cross. For the word of the cross is not just about two simple pieces of wood put together in a certain way. It is about what took place upon that cross, about Him whose arms were stretched out and nailed upon that cross, about the innocent blood which flowed down that cross. It is about the mercy of a just and loving God who demanded the ultimate sacrifice for the sins of the world. The word of the cross is about Christ crucified. But such talk is foolishness to those who are perishing. That is what the apostle says. It was foolishness in his day to the Greeks who sought after their own brand of wisdom. It was foolishness to the Jews who demanded their miraculous signs. It was foolishness even to the disciples of our Lord when he “began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things and be rejected ... and killed and after three days rise again.” Peter tried to rebuke Jesus only to be rebuked in the strongest terms by our Lord, “Get behind me Satan! You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.”

And it continues to be folly today. To the adherents of the other religions of the world, it

makes no sense to put your faith in someone who died. Indeed, as St. Paul says later in the epistle, the preaching of Christ crucified is a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles. To the Jewish people, they take very seriously the words of the Old Testament, "Cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree" and they reject the very notion that the Messiah could have died in such a way. Interestingly, the followers of Islam have a very similar teaching. Though they reject the idea that Jesus is the Son of God, they also reject the idea that he was crucified. Indeed they say it was some kind of trick, for a true prophet of God could not suffer such an ignominious death. To the rest of the world, to the wise and the learned, to the sophisticated and the self-reliant, there is no need for the cross, for we can do it on our own. We can save ourselves. Or there is no god at all, and therefore there is no hope. And so the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing. Sometimes this opposition is found in derisive comments, at other times in subtle persecution, and at other times in violent suppression. Whatever the case, we should not be surprised in the least.

## II. The Wisdom of the Message

But ... (and what an important word that is) , Paul continues, "to us who are being saved it is the power of God." In the verses of the Epistle, the apostle alternates in calling the message of the cross the power of God and the wisdom of God. It was the wisdom of God but the world through its wisdom did not know Him. Rather through the foolishness of what was preached God worked to save those who believe. The salvation of the world is offered in the preaching of Christ crucified. Holy Cross Day is not about the cross itself, though the cross is a powerful and potent symbol, rather it is about the One who died upon the cross—Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. What power and what wisdom are revealed in the work of our Lord Jesus Christ and this is the message that needs to be heard.

In the Gospel lesson for Holy Cross Day, the story is related of some Greeks who came to Philip seeking Jesus. "Sir, we would like to see Jesus." Jesus interprets this seeking as a sign of the fulfillment of his mission. Indeed, he says, "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself." And as St. John writes, Jesus thus showed the kind of death he was going to die. His death would be for all the world. Indeed as Scripture says, "He died for all, that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but unto Him who died for them and rose again." As St. Paul writes to Timothy, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners ..." The Lord Jesus in his death upon the cross accomplished the greatest thing that could be done. He saved the world from sin. And the world only needs to know it and accept it and believe it. But how sad indeed that the world so often remains in darkness. Even when the message is proclaimed it is rejected.

## III. Preaching the Crucified

And so it all comes back to the Cross and the Crucified. As Paul writes in the closing verses of the epistle: "But we preach Christ crucified, ... Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. There is the message that saves. Now there can be a lot of things that can be

preached about. The whole counsel of God in his holy Word contains many, many important things. But the most important, the most vital message is this: Christ crucified. The tragedy in much of the Christian Church today is that you can listen to lots of sermons, you can hear many words, but so often you do not hear the most important word. You can search and search for Christ and his cross and not hear it. For many years there was a sign above the center entrance in the narthex in this church which read: "We preach Christ crucified" –What a powerful reminder that was. Perhaps we should put it back there.

And what of the cross. The cross must be upon our foreheads and upon our hearts in token that we have been redeemed by Christ the crucified as the baptism service reminds us. The cross must be more than even a symbol upon the steeples of our churches or on the paraments upon the altar. The cross of Christ must be central to our lives. As Saint Paul writes a little later in the first letter to the Corinthians--"Far be it for me to glory, except in the cross of my Lord Jesus Christ!"

The Cross and the Crucified—in it (in Him) is our life and salvation.

Drawn to the cross  
Which Thou hast blessed  
With healing words for souls distressed  
To find in Thee my life, my rest  
Christ crucified, I come.

And then for work to do for Thee  
Which shall so sweet a service be  
That angels well might envy me  
Christ crucified, I come.

In Jesus' Name. Amen.