

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



The Cross and Religion – Tuesday of Holy Week

Tuesday 4 April 2023

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Sermon by Fr Max Kramer

For the letter to the Hebrews, more than any other text of the New Testament, the Cross of Christ needs to be understood in the context of religion. And at this midpoint of our series, ‘beyond small talk’ between the Cross and Politics and the Cross and Truth, it is to the subject of The Cross and Religion that I want to dedicate this address.

Again and again, in trying to find a language that does justice to the ways in which the Cross shatters and transforms human and cosmic realities, the letter to the Hebrews turns to the rich history and categories of temple worship. So that the Crucifixion, as the central event of divine history, becomes – to use the letter’s religious language – the Sacrifice, capital S, of Christ.

But this isn’t simply a private obsession of the author of Hebrews, rather we find traces of this connection between Christ’s death and the notion of religion, and especially sacrifice, in the Passion narratives themselves, all of which – one way or another – coordinate the death of Jesus with the sacrifice of the Passover lamb.

But what is so interesting in Hebrews, is that for an author so deeply influenced by the religious practice of the temple, he sees the Cross of Christ not only as the continuation of the sacred action of the temple life, but also as *its end, its conclusion, its termination*. To use an alternative translation: *When sins have been forgiven, there is no longer any need for sacrifice for sin.*

For the author of Hebrews, the Cross is, in a sense, the end of religion.

In Hebrews this is true in the most immediate and obvious sense in that the Cross renders the core of temple religion, namely animal sacrifice, obsolete. But, more than this, the cross also marks the end of the notion of sacred work through sacrifice, through ritual action, as a way of humans earning spiritual wages from God or paying off a spiritual debt that is owed to him.

In other words, for Hebrews, the Cross not only marks the end of sacrificial action – the killing of animals – but also sacrificial meaning, that relationship with God is transactional, that we need to offer something in return for forgiveness, that human beings, through particular practices and contexts, can engage in a kind of spiritual trading with God.

And this challenge to “religion”, of course, is something that we see also in Jesus’ teaching, where he tends to relativize the importance of ritual exactitude and claim God’s greater interest in good actions, or pure hearts, or honesty. Think of the healing on the sabbath, or the teaching about prayer in private, or the Pharisee and the Publican.

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And Jesus' challenge to religion is even more apparent in his own life and actions. This is a man who eats with sinners and tax collectors, a man who is content to be touched by a woman with a haemorrhage or who favours the good Samaritan over the purity concerns of the priest and the levite, or who dares to answer back to the High Priest.

Sacrificial action, judgmental moral codes, sacred hierarchy, purity rules, there seems to be little left of religion once Jesus is finished with it. A movement away from the determinative power of religion perhaps best symbolised by the Crucifixion of Jesus *outside* the carefully cultivated purity of the Holy City, taking on, as St Paul puts it in Galatians, not a blessing (religious approval) but a curse (religious condemnation). And leading us perhaps, in this Holy Week, to find God in the *outside*, amongst the excluded, the unrighteous, the marginalised.

Now I want to be a bit more precise about what I am saying, and what I am not saying here.

What I am not saying is that Jesus rejects a bad form of religion (ritual, purity, and the rest) in favour of a good form of religion (love thy neighbour, or it's all about personal spirituality, or you don't have to go to Church to be a good person, or all you need is love etc.), because that sort of modern idea of a pseudo-religion of pure ethical niceness is not one that would have made sense to any ancient Jew or Pagan. For them, religion without sacrifice, religion without ritual rules, religion without a focus on purity and hierarchy, was simply not religion at all. These kind of categories (rules, ritual, purity, and so on) were the defining features of religion itself, they were what the word religion simply meant, they were what religion looked, and felt, and sounded, and smelled like. And Jesus seems very suspicious of it all.

But what is so interesting to me is that this in-many-ways anti-religious message of Christ, is something that we inhabit and access through the very religious categories of which Jesus seems so suspicious. Through ritual, through particular routine, through rules, through church buildings and carefully arranged and cultivated sacred – pure – spaces, and through communal gatherings.

That's something that's as true for the most extreme Protestant as for the most extreme Catholic. Whether our rhetoric emphasises regularity or spontaneity, the reality of our services and our Christian lives are one way or another shaped by some sort of ritual and some kind of rules, some kind of concern with holiness, hierarchy and purity.

And this isn't some kind of modern aberration, a sign of a degenerate Church moving away from an ancient and authentic non-religious freedom. Because in those early letters of Paul, already, we see the Church operate in ways we would recognise – songs, readings, gatherings, shared eating. And, of

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course, most profoundly, so much of the heart of our religious worship is shaped by the command of Jesus himself.

Indeed, Jesus commands his disciples then and now, to remember his death, his Cross – the very thing which seems to be the antithesis of religion – not with a thought or with a word, but with a religious ritual around bread and wine. Do *this* in remembrance of me.

And so, it seems to me, at the heart of Christianity there is something of a paradox when it comes to religion. On one side we have Jesus' teaching and life which seem to challenge the categories and determinative significance of Religion, and yet we are called to participate in this ongoing teaching and life through practices which are themselves profoundly religious.

But if this is a paradox, it is the kind of paradox that has a dynamic quality, rather than being one that leads to a stalemate. For it seems to me that this is just one of the ways in which Christianity never entirely lets us rest on our laurels.

Christianity draws us into observances, but then challenges us with Christ's command not to feel too proud because of our observance, or to mistake their outward form for the reality of God. And, on the other side, when we are tempted to think that none of this embodied ritual really matters, we are reminded again of that command of Christ himself, to *do this in remembrance of him*.

Like so many aspects of our faith, the Christian attitude to religion has something of the nature of breath about it. Breathe in only – go for the experience or the reality and despise ritual form – and your faith will die. Breathe out only – go in only for the rituals or legalistic compliance or outward show – and your faith will die as well.

For faith to live, it seems, we need to participate in this constant reciprocal motion: the pull towards religion and the pull away from religion, both of which are established in the life of Jesus himself.

And you can see an image of this, I think, in sacred architecture itself. In fact, as Rowan Williams has suggested, you could even see it in the temple which Hebrews sees as coming to an end. For at the centre of the temple, guarded by concentric circles of holiness and purity requirements, within the very holy of holies itself, accessible only to the top man in the hierarchy, the High Priest, was the mercy seat, with the cherubim at each side, framing not an image, or a statue – like in a contemporary pagan temple – but a space. A space that represented the fact that at the heart of the cult, at the heart of religion, there was always something intangible, something more, something exceeding the ritual expression that led up to it, that God was always beyond ritual grasp.

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And we see, I feel, the same in our churches, in the devotional object of the Cross. For the Cross is an implement that at the very centre of our sacred architecture, upon the altar, is the most finely wrought depiction of such bitter ugliness. The object more than any other, perhaps, that brings together in its dynamic power the paradox of religion and anti-religion. For with an altar cross we place at the heart of our temple that which put to an end the temple sacrifice, and we depict at the centre of our holy, pure, sacred space, that cursed act which happened in that unclean, cursed, place, outside the city wall. The Cross, for us, is what the space between the Cherubim was to the high priest. The place where humans can find God in the explosive meeting of religion and anti-religion, of ritual and experience, of blessing and curse.

And so, as we participate in the special rituals of Holy Week, we are also drawn beyond them, most especially on Good Friday in gazing upon the Cross, and there we are led by the constant interplay of the beauty of ritual and the story of human brutality, more deeply into the everlasting heart of God.