



St. John the Beloved
LIBERAL CATHOLIC CHURCH

91 Carroll Crescent (PO Box 193)
Glen Iris Victoria 3146

SERMON
GOOD FRIDAY
(Two Icons of Easter)

by

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Vicar

2016

THE CRUCIFIXION ICON

This icon is an adaptation of a 19th century woodcut that appears in a book titled "Myth and Ritual in Christianity" by Alan Watts.

At the top right and left there are the **Sun** and **Moon**. They have faces as the Angels Michael and Gabriel are assigned to them in medieval symbolism. From the sky there also appear two **Stars** representing the heavens.

God the Father is shown with a golden aura, holding a garland of **Flowers** that surrounds the Son. Perhaps these are a life-giving tribute to the Holy One on the Cross. It could also represent the whole of Nature, the created world, which is nourished and sustained by the Creator of All.

The **Dove**, symbolic of the Holy Spirit, appears between the Father and the Son. Thus the three 'Persons' of the Trinity are present at this moment of the Crucifixion of our Lord, in the same way as they are recorded to have been present at His Baptism. (Matt. 3:16-17)

Jesus is shown in the traditional arrangement on the Cross. He is depicted with nails in his hands and feet. However, there is no flow of blood, neither is there a wound in his side. A **crown of thorns** is placed on his head. In this woodcut he also wears a **golden crown**, perhaps suggesting that even at this moment, he is truly "King of Kings" and "Lord of Lords", although he had put aside his priestly and kingly authority, and his spiritual power, in order to suffer crucifixion at the hands of others.

The **Lance** is shown here along the cross bar with the sponge at one end of it. Lamps are displayed hanging from the Lance. These are in a form that one would see in a liturgical setting or in a chapel, perhaps suggesting here that our Lord is the Light of the World (*Lux Mundi*).

At the foot of the Cross, which is held in the ground by two wedges, are two **Angels** kneeling in an attitude of prayer before the Word – for they know him in heaven as the Word and worshipped him there. Interestingly, there are no people shown in this woodcut.

Below the Cross is a mound, representing the world. It displays the **Skull and Cross-bones**, and the **Serpent**, the former denotes death or mortality and by tradition the serpent represents the sin of Adam. But the serpent is also indicative of other things in scripture and in symbolism generally, and one of these is Life, as it regularly sheds its skin, a symbol of new life or rebirth.

On either side of the Cross and on the borders of the picture there are bushes and trees in bloom. As with the garland of flowers, the deviser of this woodcut could be suggesting that there is always life and regeneration even in the midst of death; the two exist side-by-side. (Death precedes new life.)

As this combination of figures and symbols is unusual, I decided to prepare it as an icon as a means of entering its mysteries. An icon is like a window to mysteries beyond, and we are invited to ‘go beyond’ what we see presented and enter the mystery that it is pointing to. In the Orthodox Church, an icon is considered a sacrament in its own right, but it is not worshipped; it is a source of blessing.

Crucifixes are not usually seen in Liberal Catholic churches, however, this composite work leads us to explore aspects of the Mystery of Easter that other representations do not cover. (Some have suggested that it is not really a crucifixion in a physical sense, but perhaps in a mystical sense.) And as there were no colours in the woodcut, I had to determine these myself, which was part of the journey and the challenge.

I hope this explanation is of assistance to you as you enter the mysteries surrounding the season of Easter. I have a more detailed explanation of the Crucifixion Icon and I will place this as Supplementary Notes to this presentation.

Crucifixion Icon



THE ANASTASIS ICON

The icon of the **Resurrection** (*Anastasis* = Resurrection), sometimes known as 'The Harrowing of Hell' was developed in the ninth century, and took several variant forms. (Harrow means 'harvest'.)

This version is modelled on a mosaic in the monastery of Daphni in Athens. The church was built in 1100AD and the mosaics are original.

The Crucifixion icon is on one side of the altar and the Resurrection icon is on the other, thus framing the liturgy. In the Eucharist the broken body of Christ is taken to the people and he lives in them.

The icon depicts the **Risen Christ** raising Adam and Eve, who represent the human race. At the same time, Christ is trampling on the gates of hell and breaking the power of evil (portrayed here as a strong man who is bound); the broken bonds and key indicate our liberation. However, this event, according to the Apostle's Creed, took place between His Crucifixion and His Resurrection: "He descended into Hell; the third day He rose again from the dead...". It is all a bit puzzling!

All of this actually points to a paradox. The first thing to remember is that Time doesn't apply to eternity; it is a construct in this created order. The second thing is that the so-called Harrowing of Hell is in fact an eternal action, not a temporal action as such. Humanity, in its efforts to explain these mysteries, has presented it as happening on the Saturday, in order to point to some theological truths about the whole Easter drama and its sequence of events as best we can understand them.

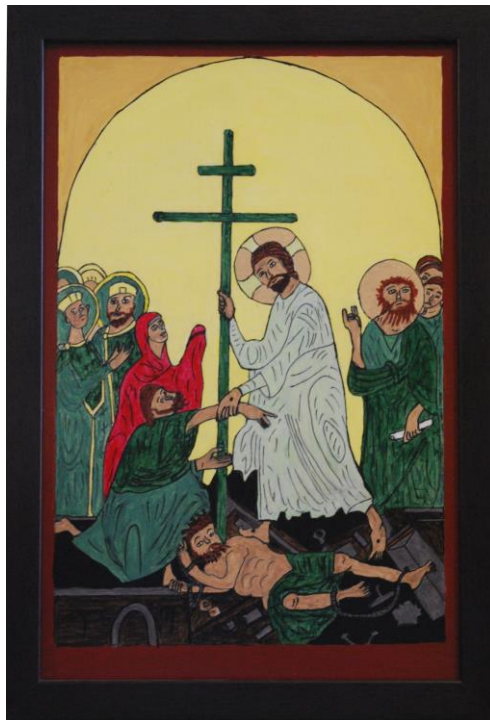
And so, describing this icon as the Anastasis (Resurrection) and yet having the Apostle's Creed placing the event on Holy Saturday, is not a problem for us in spiritual terms, as the 'harvest' of souls by our loving Lord has been occurring forever.

David and Solomon (left), a father and son combination, give Christ the status of royalty, while **John the Baptist** (right) blesses the Lamb of God (*Agnus Dei*) – “behold the lamb of God...”. (Jn. 1:29)

In this icon, the placement of the **Cross** has a special significance. Firstly, it is positioned between Adam and Christ indicating that the way to life is through the cross. Secondly, the foot of the cross is firmly on the neck of the evil one, indicating the power by which evil is contained. Note also how the hand of the evil one grasps the foot of Adam, and is unwilling to let him go.

The wounds in the hands and feet of Christ are visible and indicate that it is the crucified one whom God raised up. It is the Lamb who is on the throne. The background at the base is dark and deathly but above it is golden: incorruptible, eternal and blazing with light.

Anastasis Icon



Supplementary Notes

The Crucifixion Icon

The Cross before us is a marvelous paradox of the whole Crucifixion Mystery. On the one hand, the wood of the Cross traditionally is the entire summation of man's ignorance and sin, being the instrument of torture which it prepared for the Holy One who is God. On the other hand, in the words of an ancient antiphon:

We adore thy Cross, O Lord:
and we praise and glorify thy holy Resurrection:
for by the wood of the Cross the whole world is filled with joy.

Then come the words of the hymn:

Faithful Cross, the one Tree noble above all:
no forest affords the like of this in leaf,
or flower, or seed.

The Wood or Tree of the Cross is of the highest mythological significance, and it goes beyond the actual stake upon which the historical Jesus was hung. Many modern Christian historians think it most unlikely that Jesus was actually crucified upon a wooden cross of the type familiar in crucifixes, whether of the Latin t, Greek +, or Egyptian Tau cross forms. It was more probably a simple stake, such that the actual symbol of the Cross was shaped according to mythological rather than historical considerations. As is well known, the Cross and the Sacrificial Tree are symbols far more ancient than Christianity. This significance is referred to in some of the hymns of the church. In the book of Acts it says that our Lord was hung on a tree. (Acts 5:30)

In almost all the mythological traditions this Tree is the *Axis Mundi*, the Centre of the World, growing in the "navel of the world" as, in mediaeval drawings, the Tree of Jesse is shown growing from the navel of Jesse. In the myth of Eden the Tree stands in the centre of the Garden, at the source of the three rivers that "go out to water the garden". For obvious reasons, Christianity regards the Cross as the

centre of the world, and likewise places it upon the altar as the ritual centre of the church. And as I have remarked before, some years ago Libby and I were inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, and saw the site of the crucifixion and burial place of our Lord. In that place there is a natural fissure in the rock beneath the spot of the crucifixion. Legend has it that our Lord's blood descended this fissure to the centre of the earth, where Adam slept.

The symbolism of the Tree is quite clearly that the Tree is the world - Life itself - having its stem going into the unknown. Its branches, leaves, flowers and fruit form the multiplicity of creatures - "I am the vine; ye are the branches" (Jn 15:5) - which blossom from the ever-fertile source of life. The wood of the Tree is matter (*prima materia*), out of which all things are made, so that it is not unfitting that, in his earthly incarnation, the Son of God should be also the Son of the Carpenter - Joseph.

Furthermore, the Tree is cruciform because the Cross is the "shape of the world", since the earth has four directions or quarters, and the very universe itself - ringed by the Zodiac - has four fixed, four cardinal, and four mutable points. Christ with his Twelve Apostles correspond with the Sun and the twelve zodiacal signs, and the crucifix is very frequently found as a fronticepiece to the New Testament with the four fixed signs Taurus, Leo, Scorpio (interchangeable with the phoenix, eagle), and Aquarius at its extremities, standing for the Four Evangelists.

Have a look at the wood cut of the crucifixion that I have handed out. To this Tree, image of the created world, the Son of God is nailed by his hands and feet, and a spear is thrust in his side – five wounds. And because the world is manifested by the contrast of opposites, left and right, high and low, before and behind, day and night, good and evil, the image of the world is cruciform. On the right hand is the sun, and on the left the moon. At the head is the fiery Dove, and at the foot the serpent or the skull - contrasting figures of life and death, liberation and bondage. And so, the whole is a revelation of what human life is. This identification is the nailing, in consequence of which we are "dead and buried" - absorbed and confused in a past which "is not". St. Paul says that we are "buried" with Christ,

and that we are "raised" with Christ. (Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:12) He is pointing to the mystical journey that we take as followers of our Lord Christ, a journey that is represented in the mysteries of the sacraments and the liturgy of the church.

The "giving up", the Agape, is the Sacrifice by which the Cross is transformed from the instrument of suffering to the "medicine of the world" as it is called. The Tree of Death becomes the Tree of Life. By the same alchemy the cruciform symbol of the earth, of conflict and opposition, is also the symbol of the sun, of life-giving radiation. For this reason Christian art fashions the crucifix in two ways - the Cross of Christ suffering and the Cross of Christ in triumph, the latter showing him crowned and vested as King and Priest ("*Christus Rex*"). Notice the cross or figure above the door in the west of this church. It shows Christ as King, bestowing blessings upon the world.

Thus the Tree is standing at the axis, the crossroads of the world, at the central point of time and space.

When our Lord had "given up the ghost" and the spear had been thrust into his side, his body was taken down from the Cross and taken to the garden of Joseph of Arimathaea. Just before sundown, the beginning of the Passover Sabbath, it was laid in Joseph's tomb to await embalming upon the first day of the week since this was a work which, according to Jewish law, could not be performed on the Sabbath. (This was the Joseph who, according to the great tradition of Western Christianity, received the Holy Cup of the Last Supper and brought it to the Celtic lands of Western Europe - a tradition which is the legendary basis for the cult of the Holy Graal.)

While the Body of Christ remained in the tomb, his soul and spirit descended into Hades or Sheol, the place of imprisonment of all who had departed this world from Adam until that very day. This tradition is only once mentioned in the canonical scriptures, but is preserved in detail in the apocryphal Acts of John. Taking this text as its source, Christian art represents Hades or Hell as a dragon with a mouth lined with terrible teeth. At the approach of Christ, carrying a Cross which is now transformed into a spear and pennant, the dragon of Hades yawns wide to release Adam and

Eve, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Moses, Aaron, and all those who had lived justly under the Old Dispensation of the ages before the Incarnation of our Lord. After this "harrowing of Hell" only those who are in the following of Lucifer and his angels remain in prison. (Harrow = to harvest. Thus it is the great harvest of the righteous souls of the past.)

Yet it is most important to remind ourselves that in the "harrowing of Hell", it also shows that the power of the Incarnation is retroactive or, to put it in another way, timeless. The coming of Christ is not only an historical event - a step in a temporal process that is effective only for those who follow. It is equally effective for those who came before, and thus the Descent into Hades is a feature of the Christ story which particularly suggests the timeless and mythological character of the whole.

Hades or Hell may also be understood as the Valley of the Shadow, the experience of impotence and despair in which the "I", or ego, dies and Christ comes to life. (cf ICor. 15:31) But there is more, and it gets even more complex the further we delve into this great mystery. For example, the descent is likewise a figure of the descent of consciousness into the unconscious, of the necessity of knowing one's very depths. ("know thyself"). It is thus also a spiritual crucifixion or trial. And so long as the unconscious remains unexplored, we will remain unaware of the "dark" and hidden forces of conditioning which actually guide our life and actions. (Again, Paul reminds us of this fact.)

And so, down in Hades, the work of Christ is to bring Adam through the jaws of the dragon into Paradise. It will be remembered that when Adam was expelled from the Paradise Garden, the way back was guarded by a Cherub with a flaming sword which "turned every way". But this "Active Door" in Eden opens and shuts with such incredible rapidity or suddenness that the hero has to get through in "no time at all". His only chance is to leap without hesitation, for the slightest wavering or indecision will be his undoing. Obviously, the Active Door is the same as the "needle's eye" and the "strait and narrow gate", through which one can enter into heaven – wonderful metaphors. Adam can pass through the Jaws of Hades into

Paradise because now that he has been "crucified with Christ"; he is no more Adam but Christ (the New Adam). He goes forth into Paradise as Christ, as the New Adam. The reason is that Christ is the only one who can pass through the Active Door, being the Holy One who has no past and does not exist in time. Living entirely in the eternal Moment, it is no problem for him to move between the jaws of past and future where all others are trapped.

In the Old Testament the analogous situation is Moses' passage of the Red Sea, where the waters roll back to let "Israel" (the people of God) go through but rush together to trap "Egypt" in the flood. And so, Christ's passage through Death and Hades is likened by the Church to the Crossing of the Red Sea, for in the "harrowing of Hell" the jaws of the dragon yawn wide to give passage to those who are "in Christ", but close again upon Lucifer and his hosts. Beyond the rolling waters, the perilous gates or jaws of Hell, past and future, good and evil, life and death, and the whole gamut of opposites wherein man, as ego, is inescapably trapped, there lies the Risen Life - always open to those who leap without hesitation, those who move with the Moment and do not linger in the past.

This is the challenge for each of us – to take the leap of faith into the unknown. I think that a version of this occurs when we wake up each morning and do not know what is to come, or when we place our life in the hands of another.

The Cross before us points to so much more than the event that took place on Golgotha some 2,000 years ago; there are so many layers of meaning. I hope the approach I have taken today in my presentation, incomplete though it be, will be helpful to you in your journey through the great Mystery of Easter.

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Frederick A. Shade