

Sunday before the Exaltation of the Cross
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To the common mind, in the popular imagination, the Cross, as a symbol, is woven into the heart of our culture. Even in an age where religious observance among the peoples of Western Europe has declined sharply, the Cross still remains but now as a relic, representing something essentially from the past.

From Gothic literature to the films of Hollywood, the Cross is still recognised in the collective mind and has become transformed into the symbol of Death. It only takes two generations for a religion to begin dying; for its structures to lose cohesion; for its landmarks to lie abandoned. For like the pyramids and obelisks in the Egyptian sands, the Cross in the eyes of most people, is thought to have mattered once, something left over from what has died.

It is still to be found, of course, marking graves (it's main purpose), worn as meretricious jewellery; adorning those ersatz shrines that appear at the sites of road traffic accidents.

But for most people in our own day, the Cross has become of no more significance, and certainly no more intelligible, than the Daoist Yin and Yang or the hammer of the pagan Nordic god, Thor.

If this is so in our culture now, when did it begin? Was it perhaps in those ranks upon ranks of crosses in the military cemeteries of the First World War, forever linking the Cross and death, *lest we forget?* Yet this is perhaps an example of atavism, reversion to type. After all, before Christ what was the Cross in the common mind of the Roman Empire but a symbol of death; indeed, an instrument of death, like the hangman's noose or the headsman's axe: a means of execution.

So what are we, the great body of the Orthodox to make of all this going on around us; we, who planted on the rock of faith in Christ, can only watch in horror as western culture and all that used to underpin its fabric, cracks and slowly falls apart and comes crashing down: symbolised, perhaps, by that appalling motorway bridge

disaster recently in Genoa. May God give rest to those poor souls who perished under the rubble. For the days in which we live and must work out our own salvation, finds a feverish rush into a disastrous future, drawn on by the ingenuity of its own technology, going in such a rapid trajectory that it has little time to consider the abandonment of all that used to bind us together: those relationships founded on biological families, the rule of Law, duty, reverence, tradition, neighbourhood, loyalties, common identity, nation, language and literature.

The current age with its anxieties over equality, whilst at the same time sanctifying the rights of the individual to identify as a victim of everyone else's oppression, have converged in the stifling of free speech, demanding that we should all accept these new obsessions or be vilified. No wonder that for them the Cross can only mark what is dead.

But we the Orthodox will have nothing of this. In today's gospel, setting the scene for the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, Our Lord makes reference to an episode in the book of Numbers where, in the wilderness, the children of Israel complain against God and Moses: they loath the food they are given and fear that they will die. They were better off, they say, in Egyptian bondage. How similar they are to those today who have become addicted to the immediate and limitless self-gratification, anything that distracts for a while from the knowledge and fear of death. In the wilderness the people are attacked by fiery serpents and fall ill. When they repent, Moses is commanded to forge a brazen serpent, setting it up on a pole and whoever looked upon it was healed.

In the Church's understanding of the Holy Scriptures this story is a prefiguring of the mystery of the Cross, not as a sign for death but of a new life. Clearly, we contradict everything they stand for. The people of this age want us, the Church, to conform our teaching, our understanding, our faith, so as to bless their own will, to sanctify their right to pursue their own distorted desires. We beg their pardon and politely decline the request. For without repentance, similarly, the fiery serpents will be among them and without repentance they

cannot turn their minds around and see the sign of the Cross. For them, all they can see is death.

Not so for us! We exalt the Cross, lifting it up as what it truly is in the mind of Christ and in the mind of His holy Church: life from the dead. Unlike those around us, the Cross represents the resurrection. Its power recalls to the mind how through this instrument, our humanity was borne by Christ down into Death. And Death, which came about through Sin, was defeated in the resurrection. The one victim too many had been swallowed; that one immaculate life, self-immolated by Christ, could not be digested, for death could not contain God.

Thus the empty, exalted and adorned Cross is the sign of our restoration and our rising up, conquering hell and death and all their minions. It took time for this symbol, in this new understanding, to be openly displayed by Christians. Before that other signs signified the Faith in the days before St Constantine the Great: the fish, the Chi Rho. In this country it was St Oswald the martyr, the seventh century king of Northumbria, who bore the Cross as his standard into battle. Thus it becomes the sign of victory through sacrifice, conquering death.

As we prepare for the feast let us keep check on ourselves, lest we slide carelessly along with the world around us. Should we find ourselves at any time seeing this sign and seeing only death, let us repent, change our minds and recall the icon of the Resurrection, with Christ harrowing hell, bearing aloft His exalted Cross: not the mark of death but the sign of victory, bathed in glory. *“For God sent His Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.”*