

## *The Sign of the Cross*

Jesus's warnings in his teaching about discipleship in Luke chapter 14 can be turned into a command: "Carry the cross" (Lk. 14: 27).

When children are baptised here, I make the sign of the cross on their foreheads and state that by this sign Christ claims them as his own. The invisible but indelible mark is as sure a sign of God's blessing on them as the mark of Cain in the *Book of Genesis* protected him from harm.

When a marriage is pronounced, the bride and groom's hands are joined together and, as words of blessing are said, the officiating minister forms the sign of the cross over them. The same gesture is used at the close of acts of worship to express both blessing and dismissal.

What's more, both the baptisms and the weddings occur in the centre of the church, at the base of the steps into the chancel, in full view of the congregation, but, most significantly, at the centre of the cross because the church itself is cruciform. Like many churches, Trinity Church is laid out in the shape of a cross.

Many other churches present a cross to the world in other ways. On the road to Worcester Park from Sutton two churches face each other – one a Methodist and URC church has a large plain cross above its main door, the other, a Catholic church, has a slightly larger cross with the suffering dying Jesus. Both, in stone, plaster or concrete, are making the sign of the cross.

For several centuries, when missionaries were sent out, they were given a cross or crucifix. It was not a mere ornament or an item to distinguish their clothing from others but it's what gave the gospel they proclaimed its universal appeal, and those who received the cross possessed not only a symbol of their mission but a handbook on how to carry it out.<sup>1</sup> The cross has become the instantly recognisable symbol of Christianity and it has become the mark of Christian behaviour: for those who follow Jesus, carrying the cross

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<sup>1</sup> William Frazier (1987)

means following the way that Jesus took and with the attitude that Jesus had. The sign of the cross guides how Christians behave.

You can see the sign of the cross all over the place in churches nowadays but, in the early years the cross seems to have been largely absent from Christian art and architecture. Church historians have wondered why. Professor Frances Young has recently pulled together an argument that, rather than the cross being absent from early Christian art, it is everywhere but in other guises.

For instance, Justin Martyr in about the year 140 suggested that the sign of the cross is essentially everywhere in the world: you cannot sail a ship without a cross-shaped mast; you cannot dig or do other manual work without tools that have a cross-shape; and the upright form of a human being, with arms outstretched has of course the same cross-form.

Very shortly after Justin Martyr, Minucius Felix made the same points even more graphically:

“Your military ensigns, standards and banners are but gilded and decorated crosses; when you see a ship sailing with canvas swelling or gliding with oars extended; or when you set a yoke in place you form the sign of the cross; or when a man pays homage to God with purity of heart, stretching out his hands.”

According to these early Christians, everything points to the cross, if only you had eyes to see. And another, a Syrian called Ephrem, noted that unless a bird makes the sign of the cross it cannot fly. That gives me a chilling thought on the anniversary of 9/11: the aeroplanes that barged into the twin towers of the world trade centre 15 years ago today were cross-shaped.

In the book of Exodus, there is a story of a battle between the Israelites and the Amalekites. Justin Martyr noticed that as long as Moses stood with his hands raised in blessing the battle went well for the Israelites but when he let his hands droop the battle went the other way. In an amazing bit of Christianisation of the Old

Testament, Justin suggested that Moses had made the sign of the cross and prevailed by the cross.

That's a rather far-fetched interpretation of the text (and impossible to justify), but it serves to show how these early Christians saw the sign of the cross everywhere. And, on this basis, Frances Young argues that the cross is not absent from early Christian art – it is there in the shape of anchors, ship masts, shepherd's staffs, flying doves, men with outstretched arms and anything else that has the form of the letter 'T'.<sup>2</sup>

We see the sign of the cross that was made on Kian and Lily's foreheads, and was waved in the air above Malcolm and Sheila as they married 40 years ago everywhere now, but what does it signify?

It stands in judgement over us. It stands eternally to judge people's actions, reminding us that what we do kills goodness, what people did killed Jesus. But because the church proclaims or preaches the cross, that same cross judges the church in its weaknesses and failures. We are called to be a prophetic sign, a prophetic community through which and by which the world can be transformed. We go out from cross-focused worship to participate in God's activity in the world, where, sometimes, this will be at the heart of the political, social and economic world, whilst at other times it will be at the edges of society characterised by weakness, vulnerability and struggle. When the church with a cross above its door or on its roof fails to show the transforming love of the crucified Christ, then the cross stands as a sign of judgement, because the cross calls us back to look at ourselves. In its ambivalence – the wood on a rubbish dump that carried the glorious son of God – the cross is a sign of the divine and the dusty. As David Bosch wrote,<sup>3</sup>

“[When the church looks] at itself through the eyes of the world, the church realises that it is disreputable and shabby, susceptible to all human frailties; [when it looks] at itself through the eyes of the believers, it perceives itself as a

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<sup>2</sup> In her Didsbury Lectures of 2014.

<sup>3</sup> In *Transforming Mission* (1991), p. 389.

mystery, as the incorruptible Body of Christ on earth. We can be utterly disgusted, at times, with the earthliness of the church yet we can also be transformed, at times, with the awareness of the divine in the church.”

This is the church that carries the cross as its sign and judge.

That’s not all though. The cross also signifies forgiveness and blessing. Many Christians make the sign of the cross themselves – before receiving Communion and both at the beginning and end of worship on entering the church and as the minister forms the shape of the cross at the words of blessing. A few do it even more regularly than that – each time they pray and before each meal. In doing so they are reminding themselves of their baptism. They are, in effect, saying, “As I was marked with the sign of the cross at my baptism so I make the sign of the cross once more to call to mind that I am loved, forgiven, blessed and accepted.” The cross that judges me also forgives me and this is possible because, as the same Frances Young said in a cross-shaped poem,<sup>4</sup> the foot of the eternal, cosmic cross touches earth but its reach is infinite and its head is in the heavens.

For this reason, those who follow Jesus carry the sign of the cross.

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<sup>4</sup> *Paradox in Construing the Cross* (2016), p. 109.