

**Rev. Kevin V. Madigan**  
**Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel, NYC**  
**July 7, 2019**                      **14th Sunday of Year C (2019)**

Today's second reading from St. Paul's letter to the Christian community in Galatia begins with the words, "May I never boast except in the cross of our lord Jesus Christ." We today hear these words and we take them in stride. We are quite familiar, even comfortable, with the cross as a symbol of our faith. It was quite the opposite for those first Christians for whom the cross was not a symbol of victory, but of utter defeat. We have become accustomed to see the cross as the indicator of our houses of worship, as the emblem of the Crusaders' conquest, even as a fashion accessory. For Paul's audience it was the cruelest punishment devised by the Romans to strike terror in the heart of any would-be insurrectionist

If we were to look amidst the ruins of the Mediterranean world for evidence of the first depictions of the cross, as a religious symbol associated with Jesus, we would find it in a most unusual place. That itself would tell us much of what the cross meant for those Christians who were most familiar with it. The early Christians were very reluctant to use the cross as an emblem of decoration in their homes, or places of worship or burial. Instead, they used themes of the resurrection of the Good Shepherd, of Jesus feeding the multitude. The earliest depiction of the cross that archaeologists have discovered is not some beautiful mosaic in a Christian basilica, nor is it a fresco on a catacomb wall. It is actually a piece of graffiti scratched on the wall of an army barracks in Rome, probably put there by some soldiers mocking one of their company who was a Christian. What is significant is that on this cross one sees not the figure of Jesus, but the crudely sketched form of a donkey, and underneath the words, "Alexemeinos—most likely the name of the soldier—worships his god." For those pagan soldiers it was absurd that anyone could believe in, much less worship, a "god" who would die a criminal's death on the cross. Those soldiers could worship a "god" who promised what our decorative crosses have promised over the centuries—a "god" who would insure the triumph of war, of religious domination, of wealth and success.                      For them, that would be a god worth believing in.

In the Gospels we read how Jesus, God's Word made flesh, takes upon Himself all our limitations, our fears and uncertainties. Throughout His ministry He proclaims God's unconditional love for every single human being. And as a consequence of His faithfulness to that mission given to Him by the One whom he calls "Father," He is willing to accept the rejection that inevitably leads to Calvary. Throughout that ministry Jesus found His security, His strength, not in being on the right side of His contemporaries, in matters religious or political, nor in the power of wealth, or

learning, or social prestige—the ways in which we are accustomed to look for our security or validation. Instead His confidence was rooted in the very goodness of life, because at its foundation was His Father's Presence. Ever aware of that Presence, He could fearlessly announce God's reign of love and peace. He could accomplish this without evasion or denial, without resentment or rancor, without anger or bitterness. He endures the cross on Calvary, as He must, if He is to be faithful to the mission He began in Galilee. The cross is not something Jesus seems to be looking for—we have Gethsemane to remind us of that—but there is no way out, if He is to be honest, if He is to be faithful.

The cross then is the culmination of a life lived out of love, of integrity, of faithfulness. For that reason St. Paul can find reason to boast. But He also has reason to hope, because He is convinced that by the gift of the Holy Spirit all who become disciples of the crucified and risen Jesus are given the capacity to embody in their own lives that same love, integrity and faithfulness. He boasts because He possesses what the world cannot give, the "blessed assurance" of the Father's presence in His life that enables Him to overcome any obstacle. That is the promise offered to us as well.