

In the city of Rome on the Aventine hill stands the basilica of Santa Sabina, a church built in the 5th century. Santa Sabina has many unique historical elements but one of particular interest is the wood carvings on the main doors. For one of the carvings depicts the oldest artistic representation of the crucifixion. The early Christians had paintings and icons of Jesus but they never showed him dying on the cross. Why not? Because they knew what a crucifixion was. They saw the horror of such deaths with their own eyes. It was how the Romans dished out punishment to criminals and dissidents. It was too ugly, too brutal to look at and to depict in art.

Now in the Gospel today Jesus tells us to take up our cross and follow him. “Whoever wants to become my follower, let him deny himself and take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake, and the sake of the Gospel, will save it.”

On Tuesday this week, September 14, the church will celebrate the feast of the Triumph of the Cross, the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. If we could place ourselves in the same frame of reference as the early Christians we would see what a contradiction this is. How can there be any triumph in this instrument of death any exaltation in such an element of torture? How can we exalt the cross?

Because on the other side of the cross is the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead, the Resurrection to new life. Death is the ultimate conqueror, it eventually destroys everything. But not Jesus- he was victorious over it. And through him we are too. But do we believe this?

When it comes to non-belief these days why do people claim that they have no faith in God. In general conversation we confess that we don't believe because we are logical, we are rational. Charles Darwin and evolution, Stephen Hawking and physics, science has proved that there is no God. We are too smart for that nonsense.

But in reality, I don't think so. It is something different. In your own struggle with unbelief, or in the discussion with the unbelievers at work, the unbelievers at your dinner table. What's it about? A wounded sense of justice. Suffering, sickness, loss, violence, death afflict too many good people. Injustice committed by the Church, by God's representatives. It's just not fair. I see no resolution, no justice, so God does not exist. There is nothing in which I can believe.

To look upon Christ crucified is to look at the death of God. It is to gaze upon the ultimate injustice. But in the mystery of the cross it is gaze upon life- for beyond the cross is the resurrection. And that is the good news that we Christians are called to share. We can look at the cross and see the lack of justice and it leads to anger, to doubt the existence of goodness, to despair. But no, we are Christians, in the cross we find redemption, salvation and hope in the power of love.

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