
Why Do We Carry Crosses Everywhere?

**An article for *The Cathedral Times*
by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
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Every September 14, the Feast of the Holy Cross, I ask this question: “Why do we carry these crosses everywhere?” We wear them around our necks and on our arms. We tattoo our skin with them. We lift crosses up into the air, and we process in lines behind them. We place them on our walls and doors. Do they mean simply that we are pious? That we are warm and cozy, soft-hearted people? Do they mean that we have a spiritual dimension somewhere inside us? Do they mean simply that we are from a religious family?

No, the cross means more, much more, than those things. Sadly, regrettably, tragically, the cross has also been used wrongly. It has been used in acts of violence. It has been used in acts of racism and anti-semitism and prejudice. It has been used in ways that are directly antagonistic to the way of Jesus.

But the cross means something which is the very opposite of violence, and it means something that is much more profound than mere emotional pietism. In Jesus’ day, crucifixion was a shameful form of death, akin to the electric chair, or even akin to lynching. To wear a cross around your neck in Jesus’ time would be akin, in our time, to wearing an electric chair around your neck. Strange. Brutal.

What happened? It is a testament to the power of Christ that the image changed. The image became transformed. That transformation declares that even the most painful suffering and most gruesome death are not stronger than God. God is greater. God defeats death at the cross.

Why the cross? I offer three answers. First of all, the cross means pain. Pain. I wish it didn’t mean this. I wish life itself did not include pain. There are some religions, in fact, who try to say that pain and suffering do not exist, that they are just illusions.

But Christianity admits that yes, pain and suffering really do exist. In fact, we share an important tenet with Buddhism in this regard. Life is suffering. Life, we believe, is much more than that, of course. But life does involve suffering. None of us gets around pain and suffering. The way to the other side of pain and suffering is not around it, but through it.

It is Jesus who shows us how to go through, and not around, pain and suffering. The holy cross, then, reminds us that Jesus himself encountered pain, and betrayal and false witness and innocent suffering, too — more so than most of us ever will. We follow Jesus and the cross because they show us the way through. Remember: the cross never gives us permission to inflict pain; it gives us the strength to live through it. (Those of you who want more information might read what Robert Shaw, the Atlanta Symphony Chorus maestro, once said about the Mozart *Requiem* and the admission of pain.)

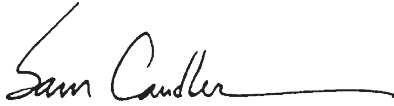
Secondly the cross means paradox. This is more complex. It starts with the very paradox between suffering and joy, and between death and life. The cross means both death and life. Christians are supposed to know how to deal with both. The cross, two simple intersecting lines, represents the truth that life always has two lines going through it, at least two lines, usually many more. People who wear the cross care about the reconciliation of “both/and.” Paradox means the ability to live with opposites. For instance, in Jesus, we live with both humanity and divinity, concepts that are often seen as opposites, but which, to us, are not.

Thirdly, and finally: the cross means love. It was love that brought Jesus into the world, and it was love that led Jesus to the cross. The reason we follow Jesus to the cross is because we want to love like he loved.

In short, wearing the cross around our necks means that we choose to love. In the midst of pain, we choose to

love. In the midst of paradox, we choose to love. In the midst of things we cannot hold together, things we cannot understand, we choose to love. In the midst of life, we choose to love, to give ourselves for each other. To for-give.

Love was the choice Jesus made, and he made that choice most powerfully at the cross, the holy cross. The holy cross means pain, but it means paradox even more, and even more still, the cross means love. Jesus loves us, this we know, for the cross tells us so.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

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