

There is a tremendous temptation just to leave this Gospel alone, unanswered and unexplored. To say nothing and to just sit in silent contemplation and consider what it means that God's gift of *shalom* to all creation was murdered on a cross not entirely unlike this one.

The temptation just to sit in silence is there because whatever we say about the Son of God dying because of human self-involvement, fear and greed – whatever we say is insufficient. What's more, the cross holds such personal meaning for each of us that silent reverence may seem the only choice. Theological or scriptural explanations might only create more questions than they answer.

But there it stands, its own silent witness; an instrument of shameful death like the one that God transformed into a fountain of life and light and love. And so we must say something. Face to face with the ultimate mystery of God's creating and redeeming activity in this world, we can pause in reverent silence, but then we have to respond in some limited way to what is literally the crucial question: what does this cross mean? Now, the cross of Christ never means just one thing, so let me tell you about three crosses that have meant something to me.

The first cross is in a small adobe church about 30 miles north of Santa Fe, New Mexico, high in the Sangre de Cristo mountains. Here's the story of how that cross came to be where it is today.

On the night of Good Friday 207 years ago, a Franciscan friar saw a light beaming from a hillside near the Santa Cruz River. He walked toward the light and saw that it was coming out of the ground. Digging with his bare hands, he found a crucifix; a green cross about six feet tall with a corpus – a likeness of Jesus – bleeding from the head and hands and knees.

The friar told the local parish priest what he had found. So the priest went to the crucifix and carried it more than six miles back to his church in Santa Cruz. In the morning, the crucifix was gone. The priest went back to Chimayó and found the crucifix in the original hole again. He took it back to Santa Cruz, but the same thing happened twice more, with the crucifix always ending up back in its original location. And so that spot is where the people built El Santuario de Chimayó.

The crucifix now hangs behind the altar at Chimayó, but that's not the end of the story. You see, there is a door just to the left of the nave that opens into a small prayer room. And there you see dozens of discarded crutches, eyeglasses, syringes, prescription bottles and more. The walls are plastered with pictures and letters from people testifying to the healing

power of the holy dirt that they take from a hole in the floor of an adjoining room about the size of a walk-in closet.

People take the fine-grained dirt from the hole dug to find the crucifix. They mix the dirt with food or water and consume it. They make pastes and rub it on their bodies. Or they just carry the dirt around with them.

I have sat in that sanctuary with a bit of holy envy. Why, I used to wonder, do I seem to require a more complicated theological or scriptural connection before I can give my trust to a crucifix that so many people just accept? I had questions. They had faith. I looked for consistency. They looked for miracles.



Cross number two is also a wooden crucifix. But this cross must be 11 feet tall and the corpus of Jesus is surely close to seven feet tall. Much more muscular and life-like than the Jesus on the thin wood of the cross in Chimayó, the crucifix that rises up the wall behind the altar at St. Paul's in downtown Seattle is truly imposing. In fact, the crucifix has been a little overwhelming for some visitors, but it has also been the focus of healing of a very different sort than the physical cures of Chimayó.

The Anglo-Catholic St. Paul's is located in the heart of Seattle's arts district. The parish's outreach to the diverse local population included an intentional open welcome to the LGBTQ community.

By the 1980s, St. Paul's was being directly affected by the AIDS pandemic devastating urban populations across America. Not only did St. Paul's lose a significant portion of its own parish population to AIDS, the church was the only religious body in the greater Seattle area publicly willing to host burial services for anyone who died from AIDS, irrespective of their faith affiliation. Well into the '90s, the church was full of bodies, and grief and sadness.

But there was something else.

There was a crucifix behind the altar that became the focal point for that loss and confusion and pain. There are still people in the parish who will tell you that the image of Jesus dying on that cross become more than simply a repository for their anguish. The image of Jesus on that particular cross captured their grief and made it holy.

Through that image, God transfigured agony into gifts of emotional and spiritual insight and growth. For many of the people who gaze on it, that specific crucifix is a visual version of a prayer that we use in walking the Stations of the Cross: "Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace."

And through that image, God has answered the rest of that prayer for people who have come to love the crucifix behind the altar of St. Paul's. God has so clothed them in God's Spirit that they, reaching forth their hands in love, are bringing those who do not know God to the knowledge and love of God.



The third cross that I want to share with you is right here in my hand. This is a small olive-wood palm cross made in Bethlehem that Bishop Greg gave me on our Holy Land pilgrimage.

I was consistently surprised at the places in Israel and Palestine had little or nothing to say to me. I was pleased at those places that spoke to my head or my heart. But I was most moved and changed perhaps forever by places that spoke in the deepest core of my being.

And the Church of the Holy Sepulcher provided all of those. The tomb itself was interesting, and I was compelled to kiss the stone where Jesus' body was washed. But I was genuinely unprepared for my encounter with the rock that held the actual Cross of Christ; Calvary itself.

Going up a treacherous and narrow stone staircase takes you up to a group of three altars. First there a small chapel with an altar dedicated to the nailing of Jesus to the cross. Behind the altar is a gorgeous 12<sup>th</sup> c. Crusader mosaic. Next to that is an altar dedicated to Our Lady of Sorrows with a statue of Mary that many believe to be miraculous.

Then there is the chapel of Calvary. The chapel drips with ornate silverwork, iconography, candles and thuribles. It's over the top in a way that captures the Orthodox expression of devotion.

And if you get down on your knees, you can crawl beneath the altar and reach through a hole in a silver disc to touch the rock itself. You can feel the point where history and heaven once touched in a way that will never happen again. When I laid my hand on the stone that held the cross and received the blood of Christ, something opened deep within me.

Perhaps a little of the unquestioning trust I noticed in Chimayó took root in me after all. Because instead of thinking or praying or even crying, I reached into my pocket and laid this small olive wood cross on the stone below the altar. The stone that held the one cross that imbues every cross with meaning, both personal and all-embracing. The one cruel cross that transfigured heartbreak and murder into a symbol of the mystery of life and love that God pours into the unexplainable suffering of the world.

Children of the living God, behold the wood of the cross. See what it reveals to you. Hear what it says to you.