

Every ten years, the villagers of Oberammergau in Bavaria perform their world-famous Passion Play, a tradition which first started in 1634. This year, 2010, will see more than 2,000 villagers portray Jesus' journey into Jerusalem, his death and resurrection.

Today is Palm Sunday, the start of Holy Week and on this day, in many churches, including ours this year, the congregation listens to a reading about the Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ. The reading of Christ's Passion at the start of Holy Week is important, because many people will only attend services today and on Easter Sunday. This means that without the reading of the Passion, they would only hear two accounts, both joyful. Today, we remember Jesus' joyful and triumphant entry into Jerusalem; and on Easter Sunday, the account of His glorious resurrection. However, what would be missing are the events of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Basically, you can't have Easter without Good Friday and that means recognising and acknowledging Christ's suffering and death on a cross.

For many people, a cross has become a decoration or a piece of jewellery. In fact, going by the evidence around, I would say it seems to be a highly popular emblem to wear; either as earrings or as a pendant around the neck. Church buildings are decorated with crosses and altars are bedecked with them. But does all this mean that the real power and message of the cross is received by as many people?

Any man who was crucified by the Romans went through an agonising death, but Jesus did not undergo the normal routine of crucifixion. The scriptures make that clear. Certainly, the things that happened to Jesus were not normally part of the crucifixion process. For example, before he was sent to the cross, he was subjected to the public humiliation of a mock trial before Pontius Pilate, during which he was abused, beaten and disfigured. His beard was torn out and a crown of thorns was placed on his head, as a gesture of mockery at His claim to be a king. Even before he appeared in public at His trial, He had undergone severe sufferings in physical and mental terms.

As many of you know, crucifixion was not a Jewish form of execution – capital offenders were stoned to death. The Romans crucified condemned slaves, the lowest criminals and political rebels. The cross was a symbol of horror and shame.

This morning we were all given a Palm Cross, which we took outside with us and, hopefully, we were seen by other people in Biggin Hill. So today we have all 'picked up our cross', BUT HAVE WE 'TAKEN UP OUR CROSS' TO FOLLOW JESUS? This is the challenge of the cross. It's a challenge to become a disciple and take on what, for many, is a completely new way of living and a fresh set of values.

The death of Jesus on the cross is the supreme symbol of self-sacrifice. But it's not sacrifice for its own sake. It's a sign of commitment to the perfect will of God. Many have looked upon the crucifixion of Jesus as a noble sacrifice and so they have thought it a waste, a pity and a shame. However, God's sacrifices are never wasted; they bear great fruit. Paul puts it in his own words in his letter to the Galatians, when he says, in Chapter 2, verse 20:

'I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.'

So what is Paul saying? In a very personal sense, Paul sees himself as being involved in the crucifixion of Jesus. The crucifixion for him was the end of the

principles which dominated his old way of life. **For Paul, the cross stands as a bridge between sinful man and God, but it also stands as a separation between the new person in Christ and his old way of life.**

The old cross is a symbol of death. It stands for the abrupt, violent end of a human being. In Roman times, the man who took up his cross and started down the road was not coming back. He was not going out to have his life re-directed; he was going out to have it ended.

Through the work of the Holy Spirit in us, we enter into the reality of this death to the old. The release of the resurrection power of God cannot be a reality unless there is this radical cutting off from those powers which dominate and direct our old lives. It's this process of identification with the death of Jesus which Paul says, leads to that experience of his new life.

The cross spells the end of our old way of living – following the impulses of our old nature and the powers of evil. Through the change which the Holy Spirit effects in us, we open ourselves to God and are cut off from the old and opened up to the power of a new life in Jesus.

There is so much potential for God, but we give Him so little room to work. As I look back, even to recent times, I can see that so much of my Christian life was really the old life, lived in a religious or spiritual guise. I realise just how far away I am from what God desires me to be. How closed we are to the reality of God and his glory, and how tarnished our lives are by the self-interest and pride that dominate our lives. The fact is that we need to die to ourselves in a very radical way. There must be death to our old way of life, before a new one begins.

You can't have resurrection without crucifixion. Are you going to choose to live for Christ? If so, take up your cross and follow Him.

Amen