

A Lesson from the Cross  
September 14, 2014

Part of the story of Sts. Peter and Paul concerns the manner of their execution. St. Peter was crucified, while St. Paul was beheaded. The reason for this was that St. Peter was Palestinian, not a Roman citizen; St. Paul was from the city of Tarsus, and by birth he was a Roman citizen. His form of execution was beheading, a concession to his Roman citizenship, because beheading was considered more humane.

The recent executions of James Foley and Steven Sotloff by Islamic State (IS) extremists have gotten our attention. The world is talking about them. In thinking about them I had a terrible thought: Beheading is not the worst way to die; it is a relatively brief form of execution. Once the carotid artery and the jugular vein are severed, the condemned man bleeds to death rather quickly. The purpose of these televised executions was and is intimidation; they were done to humiliate the victims and to scare us.

In the days of the Roman Empire, crucifixion had the same purpose. It was a slow form of death, and there may have passed many hours and perhaps days before the condemned man died, naked, writhing in pain, and on public display for all to see. There was no Internet to spread the word, but the message was clear to anyone out on the streets, do not challenge Roman authority.

Christianity has taken this symbol of humiliation, pain and intimidation and turned it around. Making the sign of the cross over oneself or over others is an ancient form of devotion. We wear crosses around our necks; we decorate our churches with them; we bless our children, our homes and our automobiles with them.

St. Paul expresses well this dichotomy of interpretation- the cross as an expression of humiliation and as an expression of God's power.

"The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.... For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

It does not make sense, he is saying. The Jewish people think that seeing is believing. They demand signs. The Greeks seek wisdom: they want to understand why. I, Paul, am saying that the cross does not make sense, but it is God's way.

To us the Cross is about the defeat of evil and of death. Its lesson is expressed in words often said in the Bible, "Fear not." The world can be a scary place, but we are not to fear whatever the world throws at us. Our Lord willing took on the Cross and in doing so, defeated evil. Christ did

not promise us that life would be easy, but he did promise that if we lived life according to God's will and with faith in Him, that it would lead to a life more beautiful than we can imagine.

We are asked to carry our own crosses in life. Few are as onerous as death by beheading or crucifixion, but they are crosses nonetheless. Being a Christian means carrying one's cross with courage, with dignity, and with confidence that God blesses and strengthens us as we do so.

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Text: 1 Cor 1:18-24

BRETHREN, the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart." Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.