

## Homily for Holy Cross Day

September 14, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Philippians 2:5–11; Psalm 98:1–4; John 12:31–36a*

During Holy Week this year, I came across an explanation why the sign of the cross was not used by early Christians to symbolize their faith. They made use of lambs, a shepherd with a sheep on his shoulders, and often a fish. The Greek letters ΙΧΘΥΣ—iota, chi, theta, upsilon, and sigma—signifying the phrase “Jesus Christ Son of God Savior,” were associated sometimes with a simple drawing of a fish. There is an early third-century funeral monument in the Roman National Museum in Rome with two fish and the words in Greek, “fish of the living.”<sup>1</sup> Christians did not begin to use the cross as a symbol until after Constantine ended crucifixion in the Roman Empire. The gruesome cruelty of crucifixion needed to pass out of living memory for the cross to become more than a sign, not of suffering, but triumph.<sup>2</sup>

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[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ichthys#/media/File:Stele\\_Licina\\_Amias\\_Terne\\_67646.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ichthys#/media/File:Stele_Licina_Amias_Terne_67646.jpg), (accessed 14 September 2020).

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/crucifixion-capital-punishment>, (accessed 14 September 2020).

I've been reading the English writer Andrew Norman Wilson's book, *After the Victorians: The Decline of Britain in the World*. He describes a 1931 mission at Oxford University by the-then archbishop of York, William Temple, later archbishop of Canterbury. Wilson says, "His mission to the University of Oxford was based on his belief that the Christian world-view is a coherent one."<sup>3</sup> He ended his talk with asking those present to join in singing of Isaac Watts's great hymn, "When I survey the wondrous cross." Watts was English, but not an Anglican. He was a non-conformist minister, born in 1674, died in 1748. He invented the modern English hymn.

Temple's biographer wrote that the crowd sang loudly, but Temple stopped them before the final verse. He said, "I want you to read over this verse before you sing it. They are tremendous words. If you mean them with all your hearts, sing them as loud as you can. If you don't mean them at all, keep silent. If you mean them even a little, and want to mean them more, sing them very softly."<sup>4</sup> A person who was there wrote that to hear Watt's words "whispered by the voices of two thousand young men and women was [in the

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<sup>3</sup> Frederic A. Iremonger, *William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948), 379.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 378.

recollection of one of them] an experience never to be erased from my memory.”

These are the words: “Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small; love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.”<sup>5</sup>

Few of us American Christians, need a hymnal to sing the African-American spiritual “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” Our Episcopal Church’s *The Hymnal 1940* was the first to hymnal to include an African-American spiritual in a collection not intended for African-American congregations.<sup>6</sup>

I think it’s worth mentioning at this point in our public life that *The Hymnal 1982* includes “Lift every voice and sing,” which is widely regarded as the African-American national anthem. It was composed for an all-black school in 1900 in the segregated world of Jacksonville, Florida, for a celebration in honor of Abraham Lincoln’s birthday. The words were by James Weldon Johnson, the music by his brother John Rosamond Johnson.<sup>7</sup> We sing the hymn on the Sunday

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<sup>5</sup> The Hymnal 1982, number 474.

<sup>6</sup> *The Hymnal 1982 Companion*, ed. Raymond F. Glover (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1990), Vol. 3 A, Hymn 172, page 348.

<sup>7</sup> Hymnal Companion, Vol. 3B, number 599.

closest to the fourth of July at the preparation of the gifts. Like Watts' "When I survey," it can also bring tears to our eyes and hearts.

I'll mention briefly just two more hymns, both plainsong for most Episcopalians, "Sing my tongue, the glorious battle," sung to conclude the veneration of the cross on Good Friday and for the final hymn of the Mass of the Passion on Palm Sunday, "The royal banners forward go." Both hymns are ascribed to Venantius Honorius Fortunatus, who was born circa the year 540 and died as bishop of Poitiers, now in France, circa the year 600. I conclude my homily with the final verse of "The royal banners:"

*To thee, eternal Three in One, let homage meet by all be done;  
as by thy cross thou dost restore so rule and guide us evermore.*

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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