

SoulSpace

SERIES: AGENDA FOR LENT

Season colour: **PURPLE OR ROSE**

In this series, **Gerard Moloney CSsR** explores the meaning of Lent and how to make the most of this holy season.



VICTORY SIGN

The cross is a potent symbol because it points immediately to Christianity, to the death of Jesus. When sports people cross themselves before or after participating in an event, we know they are Christians. Some people were surprised some months ago when Daniel Sturridge removed rosary beads from around his neck before coming on as a sub in a Premiership game. Others were surprised when singer Lady Gaga, in an apology to fans for having to cancel a performance due to illness, posted a photo of herself on Instagram with rosary beads in hand. It was a public expression of her faith and trust in the crucified and resurrected one.

In some parts of the world wearing or displaying a cross or crucifix carries a real risk to life because it identifies the owner as Christian.

The cross is also a sign of contradiction. At face value, there is nothing glorious about it. Who would want to die on a cross? Only criminals and trouble-makers were put to death in that way. And yet we Christians kiss the cross on Good Friday. We make the Sign of the Cross when we pass a church and when we pray. We see the cross not as a symbol of shame and defeat but as the sign of our redemption.

In today's Gospel, during his heated debate with the religious authorities, Jesus talks about being "lifted up". "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he," he says.

"Lifted up" has two meanings in the Gospel of John. It can refer to Jesus being lifted up on the cross at Golgotha. Or it can mean the glorification or exaltation of Jesus – Jesus exalted in glory.

AN EXTRAORDINARY LOVE

Today's Gospel also contains a verse which succinctly sums up why the cross matters to Christians. "God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life." (Jn 3:16) This is one of the most famous of all Gospel verses, and it's no surprise, because it sums up our Christian faith in a nutshell. God gave his life for us on a cross out of love.

A good prayer to make this week would be to personalise that verse from the Gospel, to change the words slightly so that they apply to each of us individually. "God loved me so much that he gave his only Son so that I may not be lost but have eternal life." God loved me... little old me with all my faults and failures and hang-ups – God loved me so much that he died on a cross so that I would have eternal life. An extraordinary statement, and yet that is at the heart of our faith. It is what the cross represents.

Something else we could do this week is to wear a cross or display one prominently in our home or car or workplace. Bless yourself when passing a church or cemetery. Cross yourself before starting out on a journey and at mealtimes. Use this powerful symbol to publicly acknowledge what you believe and are celebrating this Lenten season.

Just as the bronze serpent on the pole gave life to the people of Israel in the wilderness, Jesus on the cross gives eternal life to those who believe. The cross is our victory sign. ■



Today's readings

2 Chronicles

36:14-16.19-23

Ephesians 2:4-10

John 3:14-21

GOD'S WORD TODAY

Sometimes in the crowd at a sporting event you will see a placard held up which reads John 3:16! This refers to the verse in today's Gospel which reads "God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life." This is often called 'the Gospel in miniature': if most of the New Testament were lost and all we had left were these four short phrases, then we would have the essential Christian message.

God's motive for reaching out to human beings is love, not judgment. This love is universal; it is not restricted to any particular group or institution, which is why John says that God loved the world to the extent of sending his Son as a gift. A person either accepts or declines a gift, and Nicodemus represents someone who cannot make up his or her mind so takes the parcel and leaves it in the cupboard for the time being. All we are asked to do is to keep an open mind and to allow the Spirit to lead us into a deeper relationship with the Lord.

The cross of Christ is proof of the extent to which God loves us. In a country like Ireland with a Christian tradition going back 1,500 years, it's no surprise that crosses are everywhere. So commonplace are they – on steeples, by roadsides, in graveyards, on schoolroom and hospital walls, in public parks, in people's homes – that most of us scarcely notice them.

Some people wear them as a fashion accessory, while others – a growing throng of vociferous secularists – want them removed from all public buildings and places.

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