

Symbols of Christ

All the important things in our lives have symbols...things that represent them which are not the actual thing itself. These symbols carry many meanings, but are generally recognized and understood. The third Sunday of Advent's bulletin had an insert which listed some symbols of Christmas...not symbols of Christ...but of Christmas...so very related but not identical. Although everyone associates Christmas with the birth of Christ, Christmas certainly does not mean the same thing to everyone. Just because they know that December 25th is recognized as a Christian religious special date and is observed as the birth of Jesus Christ, their associations may have more to do with Santa Claus and gifts than Jesus Christ. So what are the true symbols of Jesus Christ, why have they become the symbols and what do they mean? It is the importance of those symbols and the reality of them for us that bring us here, not just tonight but yearly. In fact, it is the importance of those symbols for us that greatly influences many of the actions of our lives every day. There are really three symbols which form the entire focus of the Christian faith: a cradle, a cross and a crown. We are here tonight to kneel at the cradle. The two scriptures which I have already read are about the cross and the crown. Isn't it amazing and somewhat ironic that both of those scriptures came from the Hebrew Scriptures? Both of which were written long before the birth, yet neither could have been realized without that birth. In the midst of all the upheaval and crisis; difficulty and problems; the many fears that this year has brought, when we began our journey of Advent, the scriptures we turn to begin with a message of hope which was also found in the writings of the prophet Isaiah who spoke about living in darkness. In tonight's reading about a people who walked in darkness upon whom a light would shine, Isaiah spoke to them of God's promise to send them a son for the throne of David and his kingdom. According to Isaiah's words, this heir to David would establish and uphold the throne with justice and righteousness, his authority would grow endlessly. There shall be endless peace. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. As time passed, this anointed one to the earthly throne of David did not seem to be coming. There remained darkness. And as is the way of God, God acts according to God's own ways. God keeps telling us God's ways are not our ways. So when God chose to send the son that would uphold the throne with justice and righteousness into the world, that son came not as a king, but as an infant born into the lowliest of status...to an unwed peasant mother of an oppressed people living in a land under foreign rule in a small village of insignificance at the time. Our story begins in a cradle...set in such a setting...and what earth shaking things came from that event. What a difference that baby made and is still making in our world today. The educational systems He has inspired, the social reforms that His teaching have brought about, and the transformation of families and lives that have come about as a result of that baby born at Bethlehem according to our narrative. The whole world knew of Caesar and thought about Rome, but in God's eternal plan, it was the babe born in Bethlehem that would most change the world. The second symbol by which Christ is known is the cross. Christmas, despite our wish to concentrate on the joy; to have meaning the cradle cannot be separated from the cross. The angel said at the birth of Jesus: "He will save His people from their sins." (Matthew 1:21). Although we all are mortal, Jesus' purpose at birth was to die for us. The central message of Christmas is that Jesus Christ, by His death and resurrection, can transform both individuals and society. Almost everyone at some time or

another feels moral guilt and failure for what they have done or what they have left undone. In every newspaper, magazine, every newscast we watch, and in the time we spend online, we see a picture of hate, lust, greed, prejudice, corruption, selfish power seeking, disregard of others...manifested in a thousand ways. These things clearly indicate something is radically wrong with human nature, with the ways we treat each other. Our scriptures tell us this is a disease called sin and that Christ came to teach us how to overcome that disease and offer us by his obedience to the ways of God a way to be transformed and reconciled to God and each other. God's plan began with guidance given to the people by Moses at Mount Sinai, but they failed to follow it. God's plan for redemption the people of the covenant always included a throne, but the throne was not to be located in Jerusalem or anywhere on earth. God's plan for our redemption was always through love, mercy and grace; the journey to the cross was made in sacrificial love which calls us to repent of our sin. That the babe born in Bethlehem was the Word who was with God and was God in the beginning is a mystery that we will never understand. That that babe was fully human and fully divine is another mystery we will never comprehend except by faith. The depth of the love that overflowed in the creation of the world and remains so constant in pursuit of covenant relations established can only be known by faith. But the cross and the resurrection that are part of God's plan of redemption are the hope of the world, the light that shines in the darkness. God's plan of redemption, that light that shines in the darkness lies in the power of God's love and grace which offer a way out of the darkness by the transforming power of that love which offered forgiveness even from the cross. The message of Christ calls for us to change, to repent of the ways of darkness and to seek the ways of the light; the message is also that in God's love there is the grace and power for this transformation to be possible. God has promised forgiveness, healing and life eternal to those who repent and turn from sin. The third symbol that is spoken of is the crown. The crown is association with a promise found in Isaiah on which the world is still waiting; a promise that the angels sang about on the night of the birth: peace on earth. Isaiah put it this way: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (Isaiah 2:4). We all long for peace among nations and among the citizens of our own country. This is a thrilling thought. But as Psalm 98, verse 9 reminds us: "He will judge the world with righteousness, and the people with equity." We are often tempted to leave our understanding of the crown which Jesus assumed when he ascended exalted to the throne with the Father as the victory over death and the gift of life eternal. Jesus' mission to the world was to reveal God's love; to bring God's reign into full expression on earth; the cradle, cross and crown symbols show that God's work was done. The Hebrew Scriptures and gospels both speak of a time of judgment. As we celebrate the cradle, we must also remember all of the symbols of our Lord and their meanings. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.