

*Sermon by Bishop Anne Dyer*

## **Holy Cross**

**We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you,  
Because by your Holy Cross you have redeemed the world.**

Today we turn a page and begin a new chapter.

This is, first of all, a new chapter in Gerry's story.

Today Gerry will be given the 'cure', the care as it were, of the people of God who make up St Devenick's, and share with me the responsibility of guiding this flock, and presenting them - more holy than he found them – before the throne of grace.

This new chapter for Gerry is part of the longer story, of which Jo is so much a part. Many of you are here today because Gerry has been a part of your own stories. More than just a friend, he has helped you to find Jesus Christ, and to grow in your own love and faithfulness to the God who calls us all to make his love known in the world.

And today is a new chapter in the story of St Devenick's, a church that has known generations of faithful ministry, and is looking now for a new beginning.

St Devenick's is a church which longs to grow – grow in every way imaginable – in depth of love for God, in obedience and faithfulness to the way of Jesus Christ, in care for those who belong and those who don't, in numbers – because there is room for more.

Now in beginning this new Chapter together, Gerry and St Devenick's, there might be few surprises. Gerry has often led worship here, there are already friendships, and relationships of prayer. In some ways this institution service is a little like a marriage taking place for a couple who have been dating for a long time.

However, I think there will be some surprises, because I am not sure that you have all read the small print, the footnote at the bottom of the page.

In the past it was enough to do all you could here to offer worship, and teaching, and care, so that those who visited wanted to stay and belong. The days of that kind of growth have gone now. People rarely just pop in to see what we are up to. No, what Gerry will do is lead you out, so that you find yourselves in places you had not anticipated, involved in ministry and service that will stretch you to the limits of your prayer. So don't be surprised, don't say that you were not told!

What we are celebrating this afternoon is also the prologue to a new chapter in the life of this Diocese. The Church Army and the Diocese are establishing a Centre of Mission in Aberdeen under Gerry's leadership, to take its place alongside all the missional work already taking place among churches of all denominations, to take a lead for us among those for whom traditional church does not work, or scratch the spot that, for them, is itching. We will gather again in January, God willing, to mark the opening of this new Centre. This will mean a drawing together of this congregation, Caf4e, and the work led by Jo at Credo.

But all of this story, these new chapters, finds its place within a much bigger story – the story of God in our world. Our stories only make sense and find direction within the story of God being known in and through Jesus Christ, his coming among us, living with us, dying on the cross and rising so that we can all have new life.

Now when I call this a story, make no mistake. I do not think that the Christian story is merely a metaphor or symbol, pointing through myth to an ultimate reality. The story of Jesus Christ is grounded in a past, present and future reality. This is the point of Holy Cross day – whose celebration we have transferred from yesterday to today.

Holy Cross places at the centre of our attention a time and a place, where Jesus Christ was hung upon a cross to die for the sins of the world. It is because of this historical event that we say:

**We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you,  
Because by your Holy Cross you have redeemed the world.**

The day itself has a very long history, finding its roots in the travels of a devout, and very wealthy, woman called Helena, who travelled to Jerusalem to find first the spot, and then the cross on which Jesus died.

By the 7<sup>th</sup> century, the church had set apart a day to celebrate the cross. It is not that the cross is worshipped – worship is for God alone – but that it is venerated as the means of Christ's passion.

All over the Christian world, churches claimed to have a fragment of the true cross found by Helena – enough wood to make a veritable forest! Such relics make their mark in Scottish History, through the section of the cross – called the Holy Rood – that was kept in Edinburgh, and carried into battle by Scottish Kings.

What began with thanksgiving and adoration of Christ, might be seen to move towards superstition and empty ritual – like the way we cross our fingers today: 'fingers crossed' we say, when hoping for something good to happen.

How easy it is to not just to forget the story, but to not know it at all. Time and again, generations would emerge whose engagement with the story of Christ and his cross became peripheral. We live in such times.

Then we remember that this is not just our story but God's story, and that it is the Spirit of God that writes onto the hearts of those who turn to God. It is that same Spirit who comes

afresh in each generation to call and equip those who will tell the story once again, tell it in ways that can be first heard, then understood, and then received.

So, for example, we see Europe turned upside down through the preaching of the cross by the friars minor – followers of St Francis, who we commonly call Franciscans. At the time when the first cities and burghs were emerging, when wealth rapidly increased for some, when the gap between rich and poor was troublingly large, poor men appeared speaking about the cross of Jesus Christ.

They came to Scotland in only the clothes they stood up in, a simple grey habit knotted with a belt. They carried bibles and books of sermons. They wore no shoes. They had the fire of the Spirit in their eyes, and people spoke of them as though they were for the very first time seeing Jesus – embodied before them in these poor Christians.

We might look back from our vantage point and see nothing but the poverty, but in fact they were among the leading intellectuals of the day. It is because of the friars that the first universities were established and blossomed. The Franciscans gave a part of every day to learning how to preach the Gospel – and their sermons were such that crowds gathered in public spaces in huge numbers to hear about Jesus. They were learning the story of God once again, and turning to live for God with a renewed passion and zeal.

Now we today know that the task before us is of the same scale. It is not just that our friends and neighbours have forgotten the story of Jesus, most have never known it.

It is our task to take it out from our churches, where we have met with Jesus, to where people are, and tell it afresh in ways that can be heard. We have to learn together how to do this, set our hearts and minds to this task, pray that the spirit that writes in our hearts will make us a living letter to our communities.

We have much to say, but it will include telling people that God in Jesus Christ has lived among us, died on a cross for us, and was raised to life again so that we too might live anew. This is why we say:

**We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you,  
Because by your Holy Cross you have redeemed the world.**