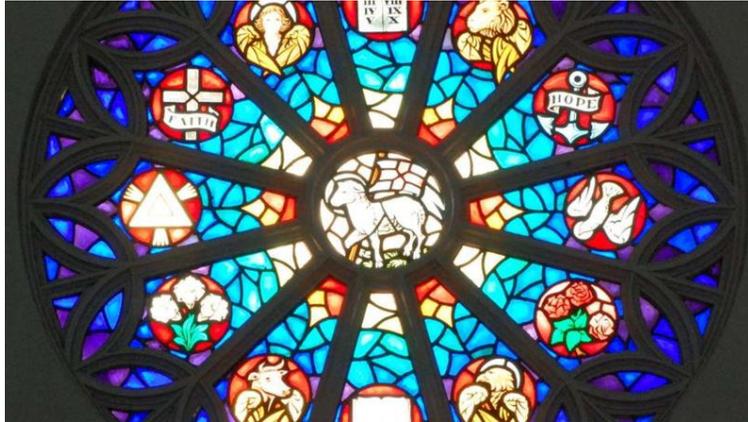


Sermon: Symbol #4 - Celtic High Crosses

Rev Steve Clifton August 14 2022 Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa ON



In the Christian tradition we like to use symbols. We get used to our symbols so we may stop noticing them, but in any church, in any sanctuary, in our publications, on our social media posts, they are there.

Just in the rose window behind me there are 13 symbols brightly communicating something about our faith.

- A dove representing the Holy Spirit.
- A Lamb representing Jesus, the Lamb of God
- Lion, Eagle, ox and angel, representing the 4 Gospels
- A symbol for the trinity...
- An anchor to represent Hope...

In our part of the Christian world here in the early 21st Century, it is the cross that is the most common symbol of our faith. The cross places an emphasis on suffering and sacrifice. And even the cross comes in variations that symbolically communicate something nuanced, beyond the Good Friday story....



As I mentioned a few weeks ago, exploring Yorkshire this spring we came upon many interesting variations of crosses in churches and church yards, each communicating something special through this common symbol.

This cross is found in St Wilfrid's Church in Burnsall, a faith community that goes back to the 7th Century.

This is a Viking cross and it stood in the cemetery for more than a 1000 years. Its flared ends are shaped like the hammer of Thor, the Norse god of thunder and war. The symbols of the old faith are present in the symbol of the new faith.



Crosses were not always the central symbol of faith. This cross was hung in the Cathedral of Cologne in what is now Germany around the year 960- and it was ground breaking. This public image of a suffering Christ astonished the Western Christian world because it was the first crucifix centrally displayed in a public worship space; crosses were for personal use. Other images were used in churches.

The cross as central symbol reminds us of God's solidarity, that God in Christ is with us in all things, no matter how dark it gets. The cross as central symbol also puts an emphasis on sacrifice and suffering and our faith tradition is broader than that. There are other things to emphasize and lift up.

This morning we will look at particular variation of the cross, one that shares a bigger story...

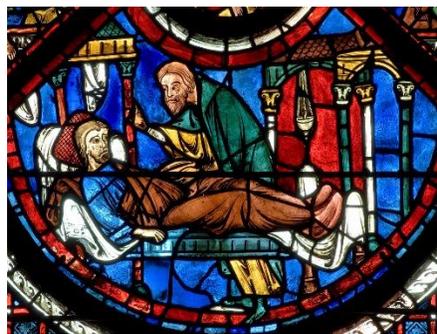


How do you share the good news of the Gospel? How do you tell salvation's story? How do you pass on the great stories of our faith tradition?

We have used symbols as engraved shorthand. This symbol was mentioned in the first sermon of this series - from the Middle East of the 1st century. The circle or spoked wheel cryptically contains the name, the title of Jesus, and captures Jesus' Great Commandment – to love God and neighbour – all this compressed into a simple image.



The Biblical story has been shared in art and image. From the Byzantine era, a mosaic in the Cathedral in Ravenna Italy tells the tale of the Magi's visit from Matthew's gospel.



In Medieval times stained glass became a medium for storytelling. In a time when most people could not read, pictures told the sacred narrative, as with this 12thC window from Chartres Cathedral in France which illustrates part of the story of the Good Samaritan.



From the time of the Renaissance, the Vatican's Sistine Chapel painting depicts salvation story and here tells of its ending: the Last Judgement.



In the Celtic tradition sacred story was sometimes passed along through a medium that was peculiar to the Celtic people. Crosses, the great High Crosses of Ireland, Scotland and Wales were created, in part to tell the story of the faith. Carved into these crosses, is the story of salvation, from Genesis to the end of time.

The Celtic High Cross is undoubtedly one of the best known symbols of Ireland. We may think of crosses like these as grave markers but for a thousand years they were rarely used for that purpose. They were for the living. What distinguishes the High crosses is that they are functional symbols, not burial markers. They were constructed as boundary markers or to mark a holy or consecrated place. They were gathering places and sites for ceremony and communal celebration.



Some of these crosses are very large. This is Muiredach's High Cross from a place called Monasterboice, about an hour's drive north of Dublin. You can see that it's very large, very tall. Its carvings have been weathered by 1000 years of wind and weather and yet they still tell a story.



Some High Crosses are very weathered and old – this one comes from the 8thC from a place called Kilbride and it is very worn (and was found in a place that was challenging to get to...)



Celtic crosses come in varied styles and dimensions...



One of the distinctive features of Celtic crosses is the ring, the circle that surrounds the cross piece on top. It might be a symbol of eternity, or it might represent a halo of resurrection. Or maybe the circle is the stone carver's way of making sure the cross endures, making the whole structure strong and durable...



The carvings of High Crosses tell a story.

The story begins: here we have on the left a depiction of the Tree of Life and of Adam and Eve, holding the forbidden fruit in their hands. And on the right we have an image of the Genesis story, of Cain killing his brother Abel.



Adam and Eve realizing that they are naked...



Moses striking the rock to provide water for Israel in the wilderness...



Jesus birth is often depicted on high crosses... The journey to Bethlehem



The visit of the magi



The end of the story is here too...Here we have Jesus bound and imprisoned as he is led to his cross.

And there are non-Biblical carvings too. Pre Christian myths, Celtic forms...



Contemporary events...St Ciarán (left) and Prince Diermet, who will become High King of Ireland, are depicted on the Cross of the Scriptures on the grounds of the great monastery at Clanmacnoise, driving in a stake at the foundation of the monastic house



There are Celtic art forms. Patterns in stone...



Cats...



The sacred story's end is here too. On the West face of Muiredach's High Cross is a depiction of the last Judgement of Matthew 25. Christ the King separates the sheep from the goats, places the condemned on his left and his chosen on his right. *Whatever you did for the least of these my sisters and brothers, you did also for me...*

The High crosses of the Celts hold symbolically the whole story of God's love for us from Creation to the end of time... They remind us not just of the crucifixion but of the whole sacred story of which the cross is a part.



Prayer of St Ciarán of Clanmacnoise

O, King of the Tree of Life,
The blossoms on the branches are your people,
The singing birds are your angels,
The whispering breeze is your Spirit.

O, King of the Tree of Life,
May the blossoms bring forth the sweetest fruit,
May the birds sing out the highest praise,

May your Spirit cover all with her gentle breath and may we all live blessedly under the
branches of your love.

We pray in devotion to your Son, who with you and the Spirit, lives and reigns,
now and forever.

Amen