

## Reflection

Lay preacher, Ngaire Southon, following a "Julian of Norwich" reflection day.

Why has that cross been left down there in the centre of the church? It's very awkward. People have been negotiating it all morning. We had to move the chairs around, so that people could get in.

It doesn't belong there – it belongs up the front here, out of the way, up high in a place of honour – not down there where it can trip people up!

But it is there, down there amongst us – an inconvenient truth.

The cross as a symbol of our Christian faith has always been a problem – a stumbling block, foolishness. It is a symbol of violence, of human degradation, of political execution.

Or is it a symbol of hope, of triumph over death, of God sharing our humanity to the very end?

Does it stand for justification – or mercy? Should we approach the cross in deep penitence or with a dance of joy?

Wars have been fought about the meaning of that symbol – wars of words and wars with swords and guns. Thousands, perhaps millions of people have died throughout the course of Christian history, because of what someone has said, or written about the cross.

Symbols carry a lot of meaning.

Symbols have meaning in two different ways.

- Historically, people have understood the symbol to point to a particular understanding Accepted ways, orthodox ways of understanding
- I place on this symbol my own understanding and meaning.

No wonder that symbols are very powerful things.

Part of their power lies in the fact that they carry far more meaning than words can. Symbols express our emotions and experiences, our gut feelings and glimpses of other realities. These things cannot be confined to words, because words depend on the use of our intellect. They define, limit, shape our thinking and feeling. In the end, words fail us.

We can connect with symbols in other ways – we can hang more meaning on them.

And of all the symbols of our Christian worship, the cross carries the greatest burden of meaning. The other great symbol, of course is the bread and wine. The cross and the bread and wine are inextricably linked in our theology. But despite all the arguments about the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, the Communion, we have today a much more united understanding with our Christian brothers and sisters about what happens when we come to the table, than we do when we start to talk about the significance of the cross.

So what so we do with the symbol of the cross? – Do we just walk away? Put it in the too-hard basket? Forget about the cross as a symbol of our faith? Many people would like to. It is just too awkward – out of tune with our understanding of a loving God. It is the ultimate in bad press for the love of God in the 21st century.

And maybe there is an argument for not emphasising the cross, when we talk to people outside the church about the life of God. But that doesn't give us – those of us who come Sunday by Sunday to worship and grow in the faith – any excuse at all. For us, like Paul's Corinthian Christians, the cross is an inconvenient truth. The symbol confronts us all the time.

For the Church throughout history, the cross has carried a whole variety of meanings – some of them contradictory – coming from all different cultures and ways of understanding.

And for each one of us, the cross has its own truth, its own significance.

And your understanding of the cross will be different from mine.

But the purpose of a symbol is :symbols always point to something beyond themselves. We might not share the same experiences and understandings, but we can together allow ourselves to be pointed beyond the symbol to a glimpse of the reality to which the symbol points.

And it will only be a glimpse. But it may be enough to keep us searching for more. And maybe, your glimpse might help me to understand mine a little better.

Very soon, we will be celebrating the sacrament of Holy Communion. This other great symbol. Today is World Communion Sunday – a day in which people all round the world will celebrate and remember their brothers and sisters in Christ.

Call it an act of solidarity, if you like.

Not everyone will eat or drink the same food. A hundred different languages will be used, and many different rites and rituals. Some people will kneel, some will stand, some will sit. Depending on the culture and the faith journey of the people involved, the symbols and ritual will all express a slightly different meanings and understandings.

But the symbol always points to something greater than itself. And all our symbols give us only glimpses of meaning. In the end, neither our words or our symbols are adequate. The truth is always greater than what we can express. Maybe we are, finally, reduced to silence.

[Click here to return to the Wesley Church Website.](#)