Good Friday 2023: The Priest Pastor

O Christ,
The Master Carpenter,
who at the last through wood and nails,
purchased our salvation,
wield well your tools in the workshop of the world,
so that we, who come rough-hewn to your bench,
may here be fashioned to a truer beauty by your hand.
We ask this for your name and for your sake.
Amen

When the new Sovereign is crowned, in just over a months time,
he will be given two magnificent monarchical symbols. The Orb and the Sceptre.
The Orb is a symbol of Godly power. A cross above a globe,
it represents Christ’s dominion over the world and the authority
that the new king will receive from God during his reign. It will be presented to him
after he puts on the Imperial Robe by the Archbishop of Canterbury
with these words:

‘Receive this orb set under the cross and remember that the whole world
is subject to the power and Empire of Christ our Redeemer’.

Within the design of the orb are 600 precious stones and pearls, including
diamonds, rubies, emeralds, amethysts and sapphires.
It was designed for the coronation of King Charles 11.
How different to the original cross, the cross of Good Friday. Rough, heavy,
carried on a flogged back, stripped of its skin. Bloodstained and an object of terror.
Probably recycled for the next 20 victims until it fell apart or rotted.
The cross is a horrible object of death, but the cross of Jesus is something else.
A symbol of God with us, suffering with us, loving us, transforming us.
Our pain is his pain. It is the heart of our faith; the mystery of redemption, the crux of the matter, a word that means the central point, coming from the Latin word for cross.

Isaiah speaks of the exaltation of the suffering servant ‘he shall be lifted up’ on that cross, yet his appearance will be so marred that he will be beyond human semblance. Yet this suffering will not be meaningless, it will be transformative: ‘by his wounds we are healed’.

The very early Christians did not use the symbol of the cross in iconography, perhaps because during persecution it was a symbol of horror and fear. Their image of Christ was more abstract – the fish symbol for Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour – or more gentle, the young shepherd carrying a lamb across his shoulders.

It was only when the Roman empire’s power began to ebb and crucifixions were just a horrible memory, that the cross became a sign of hope. Today there are crosses everywhere – in jewellery, as the floor plan of churches, on flags, and of course in the hand of the monarch. Whatever material it is made of, rough wood or diamonds, the cross is the imprint of what love looks like.

When we are baptised, we are signed with the cross, we are absolved from our sins with the sign of the cross, we make the sign of the cross over ourselves in prayer. When we are anointed with oil, it is with the sign of the cross. It is the focal point of our beautiful apse.

Our late sovereign, when receiving the orb bearing the cross, truly put her faith in the power that was greater than hers, the redeeming cross of Christ. That faith and the values she championed were jewels that were treasured and of more value than many precious stones.

May the cross, in its savagery, in its beauty, in its power, be the symbol we cling to ever more closely. May its strange contradictions, terror and comfort, horror and redemption, loneliness and love, be what inspires us all, as we walk in the way of the cross towards resurrection.

We adore you O Christ and we bless you, because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world. Amen.