

**Sunday 14 September 2025, Holy Cross Day,
Baptism Eucharist
The Revd Dr Evan McWilliams**

About two weeks ago it was reported that the Finnish Air Force were going to stop using a certain symbol on their planes, uniforms, and parade flags. This symbol was first adopted in 1918 and had a long history of use in Finnish culture, being a symbol of good luck and prosperity. You're probably very familiar with it: a cross with arms projecting at 90-degree angles. Its rather more prominent use by the German forces in the Second World War made its continued use by the Finns something of a political embarrassment.

I will admit I'm a little disappointed the usually plucky Finns didn't insist on retaining it; after all, why should the bad guys have all the cool stuff? But we know, don't we, that symbols are important and symbols come to be associated with those who use them most often and most powerfully. Once a symbol has been corrupted, it is hard to justify its continued use, even if there is a good side to the story it tells.

There are several symbols that feature in today's baptism liturgy: water, oil, and the sign of the cross. Of these three, we are most used to associating the cross with Christianity and indeed with Christians themselves. I wonder how many of you are wearing crosses around your necks. So familiar is this symbol that we can sometimes forget what it really was and what it represents.

The cross was perhaps the most cruel instrument of torture ever devised in the ancient world. It was used almost exclusively for the execution of criminals. Death by crucifixion was not a speedy process and it wasn't being nailed to it that killed; crucifixion meant death by slow exhaustion and suffocation as the body's own weight pulled down on the abdominal and chest muscles. It usually took 24 to 36 hours for a crucified person to die.

You may well wonder why the cross came to be called holy, why it is we dedicate a Feast Day to it, and why we impose it on the foreheads of children and cover our own bodies with it at various points during our services of worship. Why do we praise this terrible, ugly invention of cruel men? Well, I like to think it's a churchy version of 'why should the bad guys have all the cool stuff?' In using the cross to put Jesus to death, wicked men unwittingly prepared the cross to be a symbol not of death, but of life. 'The tree of shame was made the tree of glory; and where life was lost, there life has been restored.'

Because Jesus Christ could not be held by death's power, the instrument of his torture and death is nullified. Instead of the success of evil, the cross comes to represent the defeat of evil. When we sign ourselves with the cross, we are literally marking our bodies with the sign that says, 'Death, you lose!' When we mark our children with the cross, we are claiming them for eternal life with the one who suffered and died so that they would never have to. The Church's great claiming of the cross as its symbol, and the symbol of Christians everywhere, is a claim to victory over the worst that wicked men can do. And in today's world, that symbol is of increasing value.

The cross of Christ stands fixed even as the world moves. May these children come to know for themselves the eternal cross-bought victory of Jesus. And may they, with your help, be faithful to that symbol of victory, never bringing it into disrepute. Amen.