

Pen Mon, Christ's Cross, and His Humanity

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1 Corinthians 2:2: “for I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.”¹

In the early centuries of Christianity in the British Isles, the people of Northern England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales expressed their devotion to the Cross of Christ by erecting tall, carved stone crosses. They were usually sculptures with scenes from the Bible such as the Nativity or the Crucifixion or scenes from the Lives of the Saints such as St Anthony of the Desert and St Paul the Hermit sharing a loaf of bread. The cross at Ruthwell, Dumfriesshire, (usually dated to the 7th or 8th centuries) has some lines of poetry engraved on it in runes. The lines come from the Old English poem, the *Dram of the Rood*, which describes a dream in which the Cross tells its experience of being the Cross of Christ's suffering and death. The Cross describes Christ as a young hero who embraces the Cross for the salvation of mankind. The Cross becomes, therefore, evidence of Our Lord's humanity. On the Cross, all that could die, His humanity, did suffer and die.

Two of these ancient and holy stone crosses are preserved in the parish church at Pen Mon in the Isle of Anglesey, Wales. Anglesey is *Ynys Mon* in Welsh and Pen Mon in English is head of Anglesey. The parish church is a part of a complex of holy and historic sites. The parish church was the church of a medieval priory and was converted into the parish church after the reformation.

¹ All quotations from the Psalms are from the Coverdale translation from the Hebrew. Quotations from the Bible are from the Revised Standard Version.

In the neighbourhood of the church we find the ruins of the priory, an enormous dove-cote, a holy well and the ruins of a hermit's cell. The hermit was St Seiriol. His colleague, St Cybi, had his hermitage in what is now Holyhead, now the ferry terminal for Ireland. The two hermits would walk across the island to meet each other, to pray together and to talk about the love of God. This was much like the meeting of St Anthony of the Desert and St Paul the Hermit.

I went there one dry sunny summer day. It was the first dry day in a very rainy summer. Indeed, it stopped raining when, in a sensible moment, I bought an umbrella. It was a thirty-minute walk from the last bus stop and a very pleasant day for walking. The road ran along the side of the Menai Straits. Across the straits, I could see the mountains of Snowdonia climbing up to the skies. Eventually I arrived at my destination and found there everything that I had read about in the guidebook. I found the ruins of the medieval priory, the walls of the refectory without a roof and a house which had been built out of the ruins of the priory. On its doorstep in front of a partly open door a white dog was sleeping in the sunlight. It opened one eye to look at me, closed it and went back to sleep. Then I entered the church which was formerly the priory church. It was cool, quiet, clean and prayerful and I said my prayers there. I examined and venerated the two stone crosses. Formerly they had stood outside in the churchyard and had been moved inside the church to preserve them from the weather. Lastly I walked through the grass covered graveyard and along a trail to the holy well and the ruins of the hermit's cell. This is another place where prayer is valid and I said my prayers there. I drank cold water from the holy well which was refreshing. Then my legs told me very firmly that it was time to walk back to the bus stop and to go back to where I was staying.

Pen Mon is a holy place, founded by a hermit's prayers and sanctified by centuries of prayers. It is a historic place with its medieval priory and parish church. The two stone crosses testify to a devotion to Our Lord, to His humanity which suffered and died for our salvation and to His divinity which overcame the powers of sin and death and opened for us the way to heaven. In short, the crosses are testimony to Good Friday and Easter.

It was a warm spring day in Jerusalem on the first Good Friday some five hundred years or so before St Seiriol began his hermitage at Pen Mon. Our Lord

walked from Jerusalem to Golgotha, the place of the skull. His legs carried Him on that journey as they had carried Him across the hills of Galilee and through Judea. On that day they carried a heavier weight. They carried not only the weight of His body but also the weight of the Cross except when Simon of Cyrene carried it for Him. They carried the weight of the jeering crowds and the weeping women. “Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children” (Luke 23:28). They carried the weight of the sins of the world. As Saint John the Baptist said, “Behold the Lamb of God which takes away the sin of the world.” His legs carried Him to the Cross. There they were nailed to the Cross where He suffered and died.

Our Lord went the way which had been predicted for Him. In the Psalms, we read, “They pierced my hands and my feet, I may count all my bones; they stood staring and looking upon me; they part my garments among them and cast lots upon my vesture” (Psalm 22: 17 & 18; John 19:24). In the prophets, we read in the suffering servant songs in the book of the Prophet Isaiah, “Surely He has borne our grief and carried our sorrows, yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God and afflicted but He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities, upon Him was the chastisement that made us whole and with His stripes we are healed” (Isaiah 53:4). Isaiah calls Him, “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah (53:3). He willingly accepted the way of the Cross. In the Garden of Gethsemane He prayed, “Father, if Thou art willing, remove this cup from Me, nevertheless, not my will but Thine be done” (Luke 22:42).

It is perhaps a long way from Pen Mon on the Isle of Anglesey (Ynys Mon) to the place of the skull outside Jerusalem. In Pen Mon in the quiet peaceful countryside of Wales, the only sounds are the sea birds singing their love songs to the skies and the sheep talking to each other in the intervals of turning Welsh grass into Welsh mutton and Welsh wool. At the place of the skull outside Jerusalem the air was heavy with the jeers and curses of the crowd and the stench of suffering and death. In both places prayer is valid. In one place the hermit Seriol wrestles in prayer to understand the love of God, to know God’s love and to live God’s love in his life and community. The love of God is known in the suffering and death on the Cross. In the other place Our Lord prays. He prays for those who crucify Him, “Father, forgive them, for they

know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). His prayer begins with a cry of dereliction, “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me and art so far from my help, and from the words of my complaint” (Psalm 22:1). His prayer ends with words of confidence in His Father’s love, “for He has not despised nor abhorred the low estate of the poor and He hath not hid His face from him, but when he called unto Him He heard him” (Psalm 22:24). His last words on the Cross were, “Father into Thy hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46)

The Cross is evidence of Our Lord’s humanity which He assumed at the time of His conception in the womb of His mother, the Theotokos. The decree of the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.) defines Our Lord’s humanity and divinity in one Person of the Son of God Who is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. He is real humanity, real flesh, blood, will and energy. Remember the patristic saying, “what is not assumed is not saved.” In order to save us, He assumed all that is human save sin. (Hebrews 4: 14) His humanity is shown in His compassion at the Cross. An example of this is His concern for His Mother, “Woman, behold your son” and “Behold your mother.” (John 19: 26-27). His humanity is also shown in His compassion for the penitent thief, “Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). Compassion means ‘suffering with.’ In His humanity, He experiences the suffering and death which He could not experience in His divinity. He shares our humanity and therefore experiences our joys and sorrows, our suffering and death. He can sympathise with us and He can save us. Good Friday and Easter are not far apart. His Cross and Resurrection open for us the way into everlasting life. The two Crosses at Pen Mon lead us to Golgotha and to Easter. We are led from death to life, to Resurrection and to Heaven.

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