

## HOMILY OF CARDINAL VINCENT NICHOLS

### DOMUS GALILEA

#### FEAST OF THE EXALTATION OF THE HOLY CROSS

Today we leave Galilee and go to Jerusalem. That is fitting for this Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross of Jesus. We shall celebrate Vespers of the Feast in the very place where his death took place. We will be able to go to Golgotha. It is from there that the Cross of Jesus shines forth across all time and all places.

In the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre, just immediately below the Chapel of Golgotha, there is another chapel. It is called the Chapel of Adam. It is said to be the resting place of the skull of Adam. I recall being told that at the death of Jesus, in the earthquake which happened at that moment, the rock between the cross of Christ and the tomb of Adam was split. A fissure can still be seen. Some say that the blood of Christ flowed down to fill the skull of Adam.

This is a powerful image. The death of Jesus, the Eternal Word of God, strikes at the heart of our history, reaching to our very foundations and overcoming that original fault which forever marks our struggles, leaving us as sinful beings, constantly caught between the good we desire and the evil we do.

In this victory lies the grandeur of the Cross. This is why, instinctively, we make the sign of the cross as we come to prayer, why the cross marks landscapes and households through the world. Perhaps, too, this is why the cross is such a provocation to those who truly believe in the self-sufficiency of the human person, in our capacity to improve ourselves and our world without any so-called divine intervention. The first truth they want to deny is the truth of our own sinfulness. And this is the truth to which the cross is a witness.

The reading from the Letter to the Hebrews which we have just heard attests to this truth. Just before the verses we have heard, the author of the Letter gives a quotation from Psalm 8, 'What is man that you should keep him in mind, mortal man that you care for him? Yet you have made him little less than the Angels, put all things under his feet.' The author then reflects that this is not what we see, not the reality we know. 'But', he says, 'we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the Angels, now crowned with honour and glory.'

This is the point that he is making: that of ourselves we cannot fulfil our own potential, we can attain to that glory which is in the mind of God as his plan and intention for us. But in Christ that is indeed made possible because, as the text says, 'he has tasted death for everyone.'

So it is that the text describes Jesus as 'the head', or in other translations 'the leader', or again 'the pioneer' or, more literally, 'the architect'. He is the one who fashions for us all the pathway to our fulfilment, going first and making it possible for us to follow. This leader does not just simply illustrate the true purpose of our existence. He is not simply point it out. No, he opens the way along which we may now safely pass ourselves, if we follow him, if we bind ourselves to him.

In order to do this Jesus had to follow that path completely, confronting all the obstacles that made it impossible for us to make the journey ourselves. And the greatest of these is suffering and death. Hence the text reads, 'it was fitting that God, in bringing many children to glory, should make the leader, the pioneer perfect through suffering.'

This Holy Land, this place of our salvation, the geography of salvation, as we heard yesterday, is a land full of rocks. The citadel of David, the temple itself, the place of Jesus agony in the garden of Gethsemane, Golgotha, are all places of bear unyielding rock.

Today, on this feast, we are invited to see all the places and situations in our lives in which we are confronted by unyielding rock, rock on which we can break our teeth, or our bones; rocks which we cannot shift, against which we sense we can make no progress, and which tend to harden our own hearts. Ultimately, there is the rock of death. These are the very rocks in which the cross of Jesus has been planted. In precisely these places, when we trust ourselves to him, will the glory of the cross be most clearly seen.

Thus it is, as we all know, that the glory of the Cross, its true exaltation, does not take place in the splendour of our liturgies, but in the struggles of the dying, in the prisons of the oppressed, in the patience of the poor and in the dignity of the dispossessed, when they trust themselves to Christ. No one can glory in any human deprivation. But nor can we measure our success in simply their alleviation. The cross of Christ is brutal. But it is victorious because it casts a horizon that takes us beyond its own brutality and in doing so takes us too beyond every brutality this world produces.

Let us indeed exalt in the Cross of Christ, in him who is our leader, our head, our pioneer, our architect, our Lord and Master, for ever and ever. Amen.

+Vincent Nichols