

St. Vincent Ferrer, O.P. – On the Discovery of the Holy Cross Sermon 1

"But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ," (Gal 6:14). This text is found literally in Galatians 6 and is the designated epistle today. So, the solemnity and the present feast is called the Discovery of the Holy Cross, because St. Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine, with many miracles, discovered the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, which the Jews had hidden. About this too is our sermon. If it pleases God, we shall have good lessons for the enlightenment of the mind, the ordering of life and the consolation of our souls. But first let Mary be "Hailed."

In the present sermon I intend to treat the proposed text in three ways:

- First in the person of Christ, suffering on the cross,
- Second in the person of St. Helena, seeking the cross
- Third in the person of everyman, truly believing.

IN THE PERSON OF CHRIST

First, dealing with the text in the person of Christ suffering on the cross, Christ himself said, "Far be it from me to come to the glory of the resurrection of the body, unless through the cross." It is clearly found in sacred scripture that Christ, many times was in danger of death from the Jews, and in many ways his death was threatened, but no other way of dying pleased him than on the cross. He evaded other manners of dying by fleeing, or in other ways. But he himself freely came from Galilee to Jerusalem to die on the cross.

I. First he was in danger of death immediately when he was born. At that time Herod, a foreigner, was ruling. By the favor of the Roman Emperor he obtained the rule over the Jews. Hearing about the birth of the "King of the Jews" from the magi, and the place of his birth from the Jewish rabbis, he desired to kill him. For this purpose he sent men of arms to kill all the children in the town of Bethelhem and its surroundings, and so it happened. But the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph, saying that he should flee to Egypt with the child and his mother. And so Christ escaped. And was fulfilled the prophecy of Job 1, "[They] slew the children with the sword, and I alone have escaped," (Job 1:15, 17).

If you ask why this death did not please him, the practical answer is to instruct us so that we should avoid death from the spiritual sword of excommunication. We read in the passion that only Peter wielded a sword. "Then Simon Peter, having a sword, drew it, and struck the servant of the high priest, and cut off his right ear," (Jn 18:10). The reason why St. Peter alone wielded a sword, was because only the Pope or a prelate has the sword of the judgment of excommunication. This sword is greatly to be feared and avoided. Just as a material sword divides a member from the body by cutting, so the sword of excommunication divides and cuts a man who is a mystical member of the church from the body of the church. It is so great, that if in the church I were given an

choice, would I prefer to lose a finger or to suffer excommunication, I would rather lose a finger, even a hand or a foot than to be excommunicated for a half hour [ii.q.3 Omnis.] Nothing should so frighten a Christian than to be separated from the body of Christ? If indeed he is separated from his body, he is not a member, and if he is not his member, his spirit would not enliven him. See [*Pulchra.c.absit, de excommunicatione*]. It is called the miracle nut from the tree. This is the reason why Christ preferred not to die by a sword, so that we might shun the spiritual sword, which slays when it is said: "We declare so and so to be excommunicated etc. "Flee then from the face of the sword, for the sword is the revenger of iniquities," (Job 19:29). A man flees the face of a sword, when he acts reasonably, for he immediately seeks absolution. No one says I eat, drink and sleep as well now as I did before excommunication. I eat bread, etc., but the soul does not eat. This is worse.

II. Second Christ was in danger of dying by being thrown down, as we read in Luke 4. Christ was born in the town of Bethlehem, and was raised in the town of Nazareth. And so he is called Jesus of Nazareth. He began to preach and work miracles in the town of Capharnum. Then the Jews said, "great things as we have heard done in Capharnaum, do also here in thy own country," (Lk 4:23). Jesus responded to them in judgment that they were not worthy, because they did not believe in him. Moreover they despised him saying, "Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary," (Mt 13:55). "And they all ... were filled with anger... And they rose up and thrust him out of the city; and they brought him to the brow of the hill, whereon their city was built, that they might cast him down headlong." (Lk 4:28-29). But he rendered himself invisible to those who were saying as they were seeking him, "Where is he?" Jesus however "passing through the midst of them, went his way." (Lk 4:30).

Why did he prefer not to die in this way? Because if he wanted, he could also have saved the whole world through this death. The reason why he preferred not to die in this way, was so that he might give us an instruction about avoiding death by falling, because this is what happens from the sin of pride. When a demon wants someone to fall into hell, first he makes him ascend to the heights of pride.

Examples:

1. First, a religious. When a religious lives devoutly in the cloister, keeping the rule and constitutions, such a one is on a smooth road that goes to heaven. But the devil wishing to cast him into hell, puts into his heart this thought, saying, "Why are you not going on for study, and perhaps to become a master in theology, and later the confessor of a king, and then a bishop?" And thus he abandons his devotion and observances etc. And when he is high on the brow of the mountain, he plummets into hell. About which David says to the devil, "when they were lifted up you have cast them down," (Ps 72:18).
2. Same for a simple clergyman. When he has a small benefice, he does not seek a concubine, because he is not able to provide for himself and children, nor does he give to friends. "O," the devil says, "I shall make you advance." He puts into his heart that he be placed with a great lord, that with him he might have

benefices etc., and when they are higher, he is cast down by the devil. "You have cast them down,"etc. (Ps 72:18).

3. Same too, for you layfolk. When a mechanic or laborer lives simply from his labor or job, he goes straight to paradise on a clear path. But the devil puts this into his heart saying, "Why are you not on the council, and in the village office, like that one, etc." And when they are, then they seek nothing else but temporal profits. "You have cast them down,"etc. (Ps 72:18).

4. Same for women, for when a woman lives simply, keeps the house, children, and loves her husband, and obeys him in all things licit and right, such a woman goes straight to paradise. But the devil puts into her heart that she become a lady. How can she possibly supply the needs of her husband? She does nothing else but what she herself shall plan, saying, "Why should I not do what that one does, and why shall I not go about dressed like that one etc." O how they are killed by being hurled down. And so Job says in the person of one cast down by the devil, "You have lifted me up, and set me as it were upon the wind, and you have mightily dashed me. I know that you will deliver me to death," (Job 30:22-23).

See here the reason why Christ preferred not to die by a death of being thrown down.

III. Third he was in danger of dying by being stoned, as is told in the gospel of John, ch. 8 and 10. When indeed the Bishop [Jesus] was preaching to the Jews about their town saying, "Amen, amen I say to you: If any man keep my word," – the evangelical law – "he shall not see death for ever," (Jn 8:51) To whom the Jews said: "Whom do you make yourself? Are you greater than our father Abraham, who is dead? and the prophets are dead." And you say, "If any man keep my word, he shall not taste death for ever," (Jn 8:52-53). Jesus replied, "Amen, amen I say to you, before Abraham was made, I am." Then the Jews said: "He is to die." "They took up stones therefore to cast at him." John writes, "But Jesus hid himself, and went out of the temple." (Jn 89:58-59).

Why did he choose not to die by this death? I respond, that [it was] for our instruction, from the sin of avarice. An avaricious man is like a hard rock, and cold, having no pity toward his needy neighbor. About the avaricious man Job says, "His heart shall be as hard as a stone," (Job 41:15). An avaricious man therefore dies by stoning. He is struck by as many stones as are the ways of avarice.

1. The first stone is the first way of avarice, which is called robbery (rapina). Temporal lords are pummeled with this stone by the devil, who are not content with their rents (redditibus), because they are not enough. So many are the vanities they do, and they seek out various strategies etc. against their vassals.

2. The second stone is called simony. By this stone prelates, clerics, and religious are stoned, those who choose not to give their services, nor minister the sacraments unless for fees, and make it is necessary to buy everything.

3. The third stone is called usury. Of old only the Jews were stoned with this stone, but now even Christians. If they should lend something to someone, they stipulate right away, "You shall give me so much." This is usury and damnation, because for lending, not even the pope can take something without sin. O how many will be struck with this stone. Also, if they have something to offer for sale, they sell it for more because of the demand (expectationem). This is usury. Also if they lend based on collateral, and they receive interest, it is usury. Also if they mutually contract the freedom of another to buy or move a mill. If therefore you want sensual things, it becomes true selling and true buying, and the price is just, otherwise however manner someone makes money or otherwise the equivalent beyond the principal, it is usury, and the damnation of souls, as is clear [XIV, q. 3 Putant imo sola spes usurarum facit; XIV q. 3. Si faeneraveris. Citations of Canon Law]

4. The fourth stone is fraud, wickedly selling or buying. By this stone are stoned merchants, bartenders, hoteliers and the like.

5. The fifth stone is calumny. By this stone are stoned jurists, lawyers, judges, procurators and notaries, who calumniously delay trials, they make disputes last when they smell money etc.

6. The sixth stone is that which is called detaining. By this stone are stoned those who hold back for themselves the wages of their servants, maids, and tithes and first fruits and the legacies of the dead, not closing the wills. Also those who hold back that which they find.

See what stones the devil casts at men. So Christ chose not to die by stoning. So scripture says, "Go not in the way of ruin," that is, avarice, "and you shall not stumble against the stones; trust not yourself to a rugged way, lest you set a stumbling block to your soul," (Sir 32:25).

IV. Fourth, he was in danger of dying drunk or poisoned. He came into this world a poor man, according to the prophecy of Zachariah, 9 : "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Sion, shout for joy, O daughter of Jerusalem: Behold your king will come to you, the just and savior: he is poor," (Zach 9:9). And he held to the poor life so much in this world that he did not have a home or a room after preaching, but he was invited by someone etc. But the Jews, his enemies, seeing that they could not kill him, by throwing him down or by stoning, wanted to poison him in secret, and they invited him to dinner. Imagine if they fashioned for him a salt of sublimated arsenic, poisoning the wine or something else. About this the prophet in the person of Christ said, "But you, O Lord, have shown me, and I have known: then you showed me their doings,...they had devised counsels against me, saying: Let us put wood on his bread, and cut him off from the land of the living, and let his name be remembered no more," (Jer 11"18-19). But Christ, who knew all things, did not wish to eat poisoned food.

Why did those not to die by this kind of death? Response: To instruct us, that we might avoid the death of being poisoned by the sin of lust. Whoever wishes to poison someone, usually puts poison into sweet and detectible food. So does the devil. Lust appears to be sweet and detectible food, but therein is found the poison of sin which kills the soul. This food is poisoned unless it be between husband and wife, keeping the correct manner etc. Job: "Can a man taste that which when tasted brings death?" (Job 6:6). As if to say "No!" No one, however hungry or thirsty would eat food which he knows to have been poisoned. And so he says, "Can a man ...?" Yet you lustfully eat of that food which you know, unless you are an unbeliever, to be poisoned with the poison of mortal sin,

V. Fifth, he was in danger of dying on a cross, being crucified. This manner of dying was pleasing to him, and he accepted it. The Jews seeing that they could not kill him by throwing him down, stoning or poisoning said, "He will die crucified. Let him be crucified. And they prepared the cross. Christ in his province, Galilee, predicted this, and knowing that the Jews were already preparing the cross, he said to his disciples, "Behold we go up to Jerusalem, and the Son of man shall be betrayed to the chief priests and the scribes, and they shall condemn him to death," (Mt 20:18). He came to death on the cross not violently, but freely, and he did not appeal the sentence given by Pilate, nor did he offer an alibi, but John says, "And bearing his own cross, he went forth to that place which is called Calvary," (Jn 19:17).

Why did this manner of dying please him more than the others? I respond, you already know that all evil, both of the soul, like the sin of ignorance, evil inclinations, and also of the body, like weaknesses, pains, labors and finally, death, all of these come from the sin of Adam and Eve. And for which reason sin comes from the taking of that forbidden fruit. Christ therefore comes to repair all evil, both of souls and of bodies. He is that fruit about whom it is said of the Virgin Mary, "Blessed is the fruit of your womb," (Lk 1:42). The fruit is returned to the tree. This is why the historians of the ancient Greeks say that the wood of the cross was from that very same wood from which Adam took the fruit. And so when Christ was on the tree of the cross, then the fruit was returned to the tree, and he repaired all evils which followed from the sin of Adam following an order. For just as the evils of the soul came first, and then the evils of the body, so Christ, in his repairing, repaired first the evils of the soul, giving a remedy through baptism, by which all sins are remitted, and he repaired the knowledge, by proclaiming for us the glory of paradise. When he shall return, – soon and very soon – for general judgment, then he shall repair the evils of the body, because then we shall rise invulnerable, and immortal etc.

See the reason why he wanted to die on the cross. And about this we have a figure in Numbers 21, from the bronze serpent hung on a pole which was a complete figure of the passion of Christ, by which we are all saved. Therefore it is says in the gospel, "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believes in him, may not perish; but may have life everlasting. (Jn 3:14-15). And the Apostle says in Galatians 6, "But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ," (Gal 6:14), in whom is salvation, life and resurrection.

IN THE PERSON OF ST. HELENA

Secondly, this text is understood in the person of St. Helena seeking the cross. For after the passion, resurrection and ascension of Christ happened, the cross was working countless miracles, by which many were converted to the faith of Christ. The Jews said, "O, this cross shall destroy us. So let it be hidden lest it be found by the Christians." And they buried it on the hill of Calvary about 20 feet underground. There they hid the sacred cross, where it was for over 200 years, until that holy woman Helena, mother of emperor Constantine found it. Once more many miracles happened there for the conversion to the faith. This is why that holy woman came to Jerusalem, to seek out the cross of Christ. She summoned all the Jewish wise men. When the queen had inquired about the cross and about the place where the Lord was crucified, and they in no way wished to reveal it, she ordered them to be burned. And they, afraid, handed over a certain Judas saying "He shall tell you everything you want. He knows everything." To whom the queen said, "By the Crucified one, I shall kill you of hunger unless you tell me the truth." She ordered him to be thrown into a dry cistern and there to be tortured with the pains of hunger. When finally he was extracted on the seventh day, and taken to the place where the holy Cross had been, and she prayed, the place suddenly was moved, and a wonderful aroma was smelled, so that even Judas was amazed, and he said, with joined hands, "Truly Christ you are the Savior of the world." And, girding himself, began to dig mightily, and digging down twenty feet, uncovered three crosses.

They did not know how to discern the cross of Christ from the others, so they placed them in the middle of the city, and when about the ninth hour a certain dead youth was brought forward. Judas held the casket, and they held the first cross over the body of the deceased, and then the second cross, but he did not rise. But placing the third over him, the dead boy returned to life. Many other miracles for the sick happened there. The devil in the sky was crying out, "O Judas what have you done? Judas you have worked against me. For that one at my suggestion committed betrayal, but you, shrugging me off, have found the Cross of Christ. Through him I have purchased the souls of many, through you it seems I shall lose what I have bought. Through him I reigned among the people, through you I shall be driven out of the kingdom." Judas responded, "Christ damned you in the abyss of eternal fire." And he was baptized. Many of the Jews having seen so many miracles were converted and baptized to the glory of God.

About this discovery the feast today was established, and then St. Helena was able to say, "But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ," (Gal 6:14).

Here it is said how great was the power of the cross for curing all illnesses, and today is the day, unless it happens that the health of the body would be harmful to the soul, because God is not the occasion of sin. For many it is better for their soul that they be ill, than if they were healthy. Therefore you should not be running to demons or conjurers, but place on your weakness the bandage [emplastrum] of the cross of Christ, when with the name of Jesus, with the warmth of devotion and holiness, so great is the power of the cross of Christ that you shall have health. And so let it now be sung,

Salve crux sancta, salve mundi gloria,	Holy cross greeting! Glory of this world we hail.
Vera spes nostra, vera ferens gaudia,	Truly our one hope, bringing joys that never fail;
Signum salutis, salus in periculis,	Sign of salvation, safety in the danger rife,
Vitale lignum vitam ferens omnium.	Tree life-producing, bearing each one's truest Life..

Hymn for Matins, Feast of the Exultation of the Holy Cross, Dominican Breviary

The power of the cross even among the infidels is greatly attested by all. For Gregory refers in [Book III of the Dialogues, ch. 7](#) that one day a certain Jew was coming to Rome. As the day was ending, and when he had no place to spend the night, he took up in a certain pagan temple to sleep. Fearing this sacrilegious place, although he did not have faith in Christ, nevertheless he took care to protect himself with the sign of the cross. Waking in the middle of the night he saw a multitude of evil spirits, and Satan sitting in the center, and all those assisting him. And one of the evil spirits coming up adored him. To whom he said, Where have you come from? I was in such a province and I stirred up much warfare. Note well, in this legend up to where. [The Jew who all this while lay waking, and heard all that which they said, was wonderfully afraid: at length the master devil sent some of his followers to see who he was, and how he durst presume to lodge in their temple. When they were come, and had narrowly viewed him, they found that he was marked with the mystical sign of the cross: whereat they marvelled and said: "Alas, alas, here is] an empty vessel, but yet it is signed" At this exclamation the swarm of evil spirits disappeared. The Jew, however, came to the bishop and told him the whole story in order, and received baptism.

IN THE PERSON OF EVERYONE

Third, the given text is treated in the person of everyone who is a true believer. For the glory which we hope for in heaven, we have through the cross of Christ, because on it he suffered. And so no one before the passion of Christ entered into heaven, but went either to hell, or to the place of purgation, or to the place of children, limbo, or the bosom of the perfect, which is called the bosom of Abraham. It is said that hell is in the heart of the earth where there are chambers like the core of an apple. Into the bosom of Abraham the souls of the saints go. First was Abel, etc., and there they await Christ who released them from there when he rose from the dead. About this the prophet Zacharias, ch. 9: "You also by the blood of your testament have sent forth thy prisoners out of the pit, wherein is no water," (Zach 9:11).

Now, however, from the fact that a Christian believes in Christ and is obedient to him, when he dies, he finds the gate of paradise already open in virtue of the cross. "The Cross of Christ is the key to paradise," Rabanus says [in fact Damascene, *De Fide* IV, c 12], but it requires belief and obedience, and so we go to the glory of Paradise which we have through the cross. And so we sing now, "But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom is our salvation, life, and resurrection, through whom we have been saved and freed," (Introit, Feast of the Holy Cross).

Appendix:

Vincent of Beauvais - The Golden Legend, Book III

ENGLISHED by WILLIAM CAXTON, First Edition 1483

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/goldenlegend/GoldenLegend-Volume3.htm>

The Invention of the Holy Cross, 78

...Then anon he [Constantine] believed perfectly in God and did do baptize him, and after it happed that Constantine his son remembered the victory of his father, and sent to Helena his mother for to find the holy cross. Then Helena went in to Jerusalem and did do assemble all the wise men of the country, and when they were assembled they would fain know wherefore they were called. Then one Judas said to them: I wot well that she will know of us where the cross of Jesu Christ was laid, but beware you all that none of you tell her, for I wot well, then shall our law be destroyed. For Zacheus, mine old father, said to Simon my father, and my father said to me at his death: Be well ware that for no torment that ye may suffer, tell not where the cross of Jesu Christ was laid, for after that it shall be found the Jews shall reign no more, but the christian men that worshipped the cross shall then reign; and verily this Jesus was the son of God. Then demanded I my father wherefore had they hanged him on the cross sith it was known that he was the son of God. Then he said to me: Fair son, I never accorded thereto, but gainsaid it always, but the Pharisees did it because he reprovod their vices; but he arose on the third day and, his disciples seeing, he ascended into heaven; then because that Stephen, thy brother, believed in him the Jews stoned him to death. Then, when Judas had said these words to his fellows, they answered: We never heard of such things, nevertheless keep thee well, if the queen demand thee thereof, that thou say no thing to her. When the queen had called them and demanded them the place where our Lord Jesu Christ had been crucified, they would never tell ne enseign her. Then commanded she to burn them all, but then they doubted and were afraid, and delivered Judas to her and said: Lady, this man is the son of a prophet and of a just man, and knoweth right well the law, and can tell to you all things that ye shall demand him. Then the queen let all the others go and retained Judas without more. Then she showed to him his life and death, and bade him choose which he would. Show to me, said she, the place named Golgotha where our Lord was crucified, because and to the end that we may find the cross. Then said Judas: It is two hundred years passed and more, and I was not then yet born. Then said to him the lady: By him that was crucified, I shall make thee perish for hunger if thou tell not to me the truth. Then made she him to be cast into a dry pit and there tormented him by hunger and evil rest. When he had been seven days in that pit, then said he: If I might be drawn out, I should say the truth. Then he was drawn out, and when he came to the place, anon the earth moved, and a fume of great sweetness was felt, in such wise that Judas smote his hands together for joy, and said: In truth, Jesu Christ, thou art the Saviour of the world.

It was so that Adrian the emperor had do make, in the same place where the cross lay, a temple of a goddess, because that all they that came in that place should adore that goddess, but the queen did do destroy the temple. Then Judas made him ready and began to dig, and when he came to twenty paces deep he found three crosses and brought them to the queen, and because he knew not which was the cross of our Lord, he laid them in the middle of the city and abode the demonstrance of God; and about the hour of noon there was the corps of a young man brought to be buried. Judas retained the bier, and laid upon it one of the crosses, and after the second, and when he laid on it the third, anon the body that was dead came again to life.

Then cried the devil in the air: Judas, what hast thou done? Thou hast done the contrary that the other Judas did, for by him I have won many souls, and by thee I shall lose many, by him I reigned on the people, and by thee I have lost my realm, nevertheless I shall yield to thee this bounty, for I shall send one that shall punish thee. And that was accomplished by Julian the apostate, which tormented him afterward, when he was bishop of Jerusalem. And when Judas heard him, he cursed the devil and said to him: Jesu Christ damn thee in fire perdurable. After this Judas was baptized and was named Quiriacus, and after was made bishop of Jerusalem.