

Sunday 13 September 2026 – Holy Cross Day (14.9)

(Numbers 21.4-9); Philippians 2.6-11; John 3.13-17

In Ipswich Hospital, and probably in many other institutions like it, there are various means for Chaplains to provide comfort to patients who are either extremely ill or just feeling very disorientated, because they are forced to be somewhere where they don't want to be.

Sometimes it is prayer, or just sympathetic conversations, or in the case of committed Christians Holy Communion with intincted wafers; or it may be something more tangible, eg wooden or knitted hearts, or a wooden cross. These wooden gifts are made of olive wood which is produced in Palestine; they are very soft and smooth to handle and can be hidden and enveloped within the palm of the human hand.

In the case of the cross there is added significance, especially for Christians of any denomination. The cross is the symbol, the emblem you might say, of the Christian faith, because it records and memorialises the most extraordinary event in history. This event was not only the arrival on earth of the Son of God in the unique person of Jesus Christ, who was both divine and human, also the fact of his life and teaching, but also crucially of his suffering and death on a crude cross, followed by his miraculous resurrection. As we know this all happened in the space of just three years.

The cross signifies Jesus' three great promises: the promise of the forgiveness of our mistakes and failings, if we say sorry; the promise of eternal life with God when our time comes; finally his promise to all of us that he would be with us at all times and in all places, even to the end of time.

This is incredibly comforting not just to sick people in hospital, but to all Christians all over the world, and it binds us all together in a unique

fellowship. However Chaplains have discovered that some non-Christians are also susceptible to these promises and welcome a prayer for themselves and their families, accompanied by the gift of an olive-wood cross. Only last week I was speaking to a woman with a serious illness who had asked to speak to a Chaplain. She said she was afraid of death and had been so ever since her older sister had died at the age of 25, when she was only 12. She has spent her working life as a nurse. I prayed for her and offered her a wooden cross. She was overcome with gratitude and even offered to pay for it.

Such is the power of the cross in all aspects of our human lives, embodying a message of hope, forgiveness and love. This is the reason a day is set aside in the Church's year (actually it is September 14th) when we praise God for all He has done for us, using the ugly motif of the Roman method of execution. In a powerful countercultural move, it has become a demonstration of God's almighty power of salvation for all of us. You may have noticed that some of us (not only the clergy) are in the habit of making the sign of the cross on our bodies at certain points in the service to emphasise its significance to us. Nowhere is this emblematic sign more apparent – to me at any rate and to other chaplains like me – than in the hospital setting, where the fact of the suffering undergone by Jesus can be so comforting for many human beings, in the form of a little olive-wood cross.

Thanks be to God !

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