The Fifth Wednesday in Lent
Rolling Meadows -- 1981

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IN NOMINE JESU

St. John 12: 20-36

There is an Old Liturgy where people were summoned to come forward devoutly to "Kiss the Cross." They were summoned with the invitation: "This is the wood of the Cross. Come, let us worship." And faithful Christians came forward with worshipful veneration of the Cross. ..... That the instrument of Christ's Death should be esteemed worthy of worship is largely due to passages like our text from John's Gospel. For John, JESUS' GOING UP TO THE CROSS is His return to the Father and entrance into glory. ..... It is what other New Testament writers call "His Ascension into heaven." ..... On the CROSS Jesus banishes the prince of this world and inaugurates His reign as Universal King! ..... Now "lifted up" from the earth, He pours forth His Spirit and begins to "draw everything to Himself" -- making it serve God's divinely intended purpose. ..... As one of the early liturgies says: "The power of the Cross reveals Your Judgment on this world and the Kingship of Christ crucified."

So it is that when we confront tragedies like the shooting of our pesident and three others -- and people are saying to themselves, "What is our society coming to" -- and we all shake out heads in utter disgust -- and maybe even throw up our hands in despair ------- we need to remember that such actions are nothing new -- they go all the way back to the time when Cain killed Abel -- and they are finalized when God's own Son is nailed the the Wood of the Cross. ..... And through that means of such terrible

torture there comes this sign of conquest and triumph. The Church fathers did not hesitate to call the Cross a "trophy." St. John Chrysostom, for example, states that Jesus "went forth bearing His Cross as a trophy in opposition to the tyranny of death." So it is that the Cross becomes the Symbol of His Victory. The point is that GOD WILL HAVE THE LAST WORD -- no matter what men do or try to do. GOD WILL HAVE THE LAST WORD!

For that reason the Cross is frequently presented as "The Tree of Life." As such it stands in stark contrast to the "Tree of Death" which exiled our first parents out of Paradise and separated them from their Creator. ..... In this connection, there is another piece of ancient liturgy that somehow makes me very emotional and even brings tears to my eyes: "The tree of man's defeat became the tree of victory; where life was lost, there life has been restored." ..... Another of the Early Church Fathers -- a man by the name of Theodore of Studios says it so eloquently: "How splendid is the Cross of Christ! It brings life, not death; light, not darkness; Paradise, not its loss. It is the WOOD on which the Lord, like a great warrior, was wounded in hands and feet and side, but healed thereby our wounds. A tree has destroyed us, a tree now brought us to life." ..... The Church Fathers keep dwelling on the WOOD of our redemption and the Cross of our salvation! St. Cyril of Jerusalem declares: "In the time of Noah the preservation of life came from a wooden ark. In Moses' time the sea, on beholding the ....rod, gave way before him who struck it."

The Cross is the means by which God establishes His "Royal Throne" and "Glorious Presence" among us. It is from the Cross that we receive His "Body and Blood" in the Holy Communion -- a restoration of our relationship with Him -- "Paradise Regained." ..... It has always been so. In the desert the Lord God instructed Moses to construct the "Ark of the Covenant" out of Wood and surmounted by the propitiatory "throne of mercy." And there is the promise from God Himself: "THERE I SHALL COME TO MEET YOU; THERE, FROM ABOVE THE THRONE OF MERCY." (Exod. 25: 22) ..... For 2000 years Christians have proclaimed that THE CROSS IS THE THRONE from which the Lord accords mercy without measure and enters an "everlasting covenant" with His people.

That brings us back to our text. The Cross is the Sign of the Lord's Final Coming. The Cross is the Sign as Jesus Himself says: "AND I, WHEN I AM LIFTED UP FROM THE EARTH, WILL DRAW ALL MEN TO MYSELF." No one will escape Him -- either "IN HEAVEN, OR ON EARTH, OR UNDER THE EARTH" -- but everyone shall finally have to acknowledge that the Wood of the Cross is the Throne of the "KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS." It is the Cross from which hangs THE SALVATION OF THE UNIVERSE! ..... Bring your reverance and adoration! This is none other than the Lord, your God -- "high and lifted up -- drawing all men to Himself!" ..... And He did it so that at last we may be secure in our daily living -- secure in spite of terrorist's bullets -- secure in the midst of "dungeon, fire, and sword" -- secure no matter what the holocaust -- secure so that we

can stand up against the Devil himself and say with Luther: "Take they our life, goods, fame, child, and wife; let these all be gone, the Kingdom ours remaineth." .....

That the Great God should go to such lengths for "us men and for our salvation" is beyond comprehension -- beyond realization. But that is how loving, and compassionate, and merciful our God is. Amen.