

Tonight we celebrate two wonderful things. The principal reason for tonight's celebration is the Holy Cross. The second is the ordination of a new priest.

It might seem strange to put our friend and colleague, whom we have all gathered to show our love and support, into second place. But Mother Allison has placed her life under the cross. And even our Lord did just that when he was crucified for the sins of the world.

It is a happy accident that Mother Allison should be ordained on this most noble night. But it is no accident that her character of life so embodies the message of the cross. It is no accident that she is a woman for whom vulnerability and passion and humility seem to come so naturally. It is no accident that her commitment to life in Christ should have colored her character in such a way as to make this connection so easy to see.

But the connection that is more difficult to see is that of the Cross to the eternal, all powerful, and most mighty God.

When I was a little boy, my church hosted a group of bodybuilding men to perform these incredible feats of strength. They were called Team Impact. Maybe you've heard of them. They set up a very dramatic stage full of wood planks and concrete blocks stacked atop each other. Giant blocks of ice, a bed of nails, and a row of Louisville sluggers.

It was an evening of just total destruction as these men used their massive arms and legs and heads to crack, break or shatter everything in sight all for Christ. They'd break those baseball bats over their thighs. They'd bench press 500 pounds while lying on a bed of nails. They even did some cool stuff with fire. They'd bend iron rebars, explode hot water bottles by blowing them up like a balloon, and then they'd say something about Jesus at the end. And it was always something like, if you think we're strong, you should get to know Jesus. And then we'd sing "What a mighty God we serve."

You can imagine being a little boy and seeing what equated to a big Christian action movie happening right before your eyes. I sure wanted to be like those guys. In fact, I still come across silverware from my grandfather's restaurant where my brother and I would bend them like we were Team Impact. After seeing them, it was very easy for me to conflate that force and show of strength with Jesus. Jesus was strong. Strong enough to whoop the devil, beat down sin. A real man's man, that Jesus.

The trouble came later. As I grew from a boy to a man, I began to realize that I wasn't strong like those body builders. Thankfully, I also learned that neither was Jesus. Maybe I missed it, but I haven't found anywhere in the new testament where Jesus broke a Louisville Slugger over his leg. But if we're to believe that Jesus is God in the flesh, well then he must be omnipotent. He must be all powerful.

Except what we see in Jesus is a man whose clearest and most known association is not with force, but with the cross, with the symbol of his defeat, arrest, torture, and death. What are we to make of this?

We hear all of the stories about God displaying God's power. The smiting of cities, the calming of chaos, the creation of worlds. We see God exercise authority over sickness, and nature, but then we see Jesus, God in the flesh, hanging helplessly upon the cross. His followers for the most part have fled. He's left only with his mother, and a few other disciples, all but one were women. Not exactly the machismo of a messiah we were expecting.

This is not the God I was promised. The God who birthed the stars surely couldn't be the same as this Jesus? Why, he didn't even defend himself at his trial!

But we are told again and again that Jesus is God. We experience his grace and love in the Eucharist. We find him in the most unlikely of places, often tugging at our hearts and leading us to conversion. What would it mean for God to hang upon the cross? Who is this God? Who is this God who not only created the heavens and the earth but undergirds every moment and who also willingly allowed himself to die at the hands of his creatures? Who though he was in the form of God, emptied himself, taking the form of the slave?

I was promised the god of Team Impact. The god of might and strength! But in Jesus I have found none other than the God of the Holy Cross. On the cross, we see God in a position of supreme vulnerability. The humility of the most high God to empty Godself and to join us in creation should not, however, be viewed as God weakening Godself. This vulnerability, this humility, this obedience to the point of death, shows us God's greatest strength.

If we accept that Jesus is God in the flesh, then it must follow that we are wrong about what our commonly held concepts of omnipotence and power and strength actually mean. Because who we see in Jesus is not the god of force, of violence, of patriarchal might, but rather the God who out of a desire to save us joined us in the struggle against sin.

But beyond being a God of solidarity, Jesus transforms our sorrow, pain and defeat and gives us victory. By his death, he went down into the pits of hell and defeated sin and death. Not with an army. But with scars. Not with a weapon. But with the cross. That awful torture device which caesar forged from fear was transformed by the precious blood of the savior into the very death of death itself.

Its presence once stoked fear among us but today it is feared by the demons. Its legacy was once of death, but today it is life. Its purpose was conquest but today is conversion. What a mighty God we serve: The God who transformed those timbers of destruction into the life raft of our liberation.

The cross represents not Christ's defeat but his glorification. His being lifted up to draw all people to himself demonstrates for us the true and eternal might of the true and eternal God. His incarnation, crucifixion, his self emptying is not a condescension, a lessening, a weakening of or separation from his divinity, but a manifestation of the one eternal act by which God is God.

And so now it is incumbent upon us to be of the same mind as this God. We are called by Saint Paul to approach life with the humility of a people acquainted with death but also with death's cure. If the blood of the savior can transform the cross into glory, what do you think it will do to us?

There is no need for great feats of strength from us, but only simple acts of devotion, prayer and service until at the last breath we greet death with the confidence that our God knows the way out of the grave.

Given all this, it would make sense that this God would not do God's greatest work through the strong and mighty and proud who believe they have no need of his salvation. So God enlists broken, flawed, even weak people into the ministry of God's Church. Because when we've been cracked open by the pain of the world, we find that it is through those cracks that grace seeps in and seizes us. And it is that grace that cracks open the tomb, and we feel the scarred hands of the savior grab us and pull us out of whatever grave has been dug for us.

To be a priest is to carry this hope for salvation like a mantle. To find those in God's flock who need to be reminded of God's love for them. And when you come upon people who are deep in the pit of despair, your job is to let Christ work through you. Drop them down a ladder and give them a hand up.

The ladder of the Cross has been raised up for each of us, but sometimes we need a little extra help, and so God will send you. And Hell will tremble not because of anything you will do, but because of everything God has done. And as God's priest, you are a visceral reminder to the powers and dominions that God has chosen what was low in the world to reduce to nothing things that are.

So cling to the cross, it is your sword and shield. It is your only defence and your only attack. It is your refuge and your strength. Bear it daily. And never doubt the strength of God that is in you to do what God has called you to do.