

Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross A/2014

The readings of this feast focus on the exaltation of the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. They remind us that by accepting to die the humiliating death of the cross, Jesus has proven how much he loves us. They invite us to embrace the cross as the instrument of our salvation.

The first reading describes the revolt of the people of Israel in the desert. It shows how God punished them in the desert with the mortal bite of a serpent because of their sins. It equally shows how God forgave them as they recognized their wrong-doings and begged Moses to intercede for them. The text indicates also the means that Moses used in order to obtain the healing of the Israelites, namely a serpent of bronze mounted on a spot he fabricated according to the instructions received from God.

What is behind this text is the idea that human suffering very often blinds people to the point of forgetting God's good deeds done to them. Another idea is that God is merciful and forgiving. The last idea is relative to the truth that whatever might be the gravity of the sins people commit, anytime they change and come back to God, he forgives them.

This text allows us to understand what is at stake in today's Gospel as Jesus is talking to Nicodemus about God's love for the world. First of all, the Gospel starts with Jesus' declaration that no one has gone up to heaven except the Son of man who came down from it. Then, it gives Jesus' statement declaring that as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so will the Son of Man be lifted so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

After that, Jesus affirms that God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that whoever believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life. Then, he says that God did not send his son to condemn the world, but rather in order to save it through him. Finally, Jesus says that whoever believes in him is not condemned, while the one who does not believe is already condemned.

What do we learn from today's readings? Today I want to talk about the cross as a sign of love and an instrument of our redemption. In order to understand the importance of the cross and its meaning for us today, it is better to situate it in its historical context.

In fact, in Ancient Israel, the most common method of capital punishment was the stoning, as we find it mentioned many times in the Bible. At the Roman colonization, the Romans introduced a new method of execution which was the crucifixion.

Only those who were considered criminal and rejected by society were put to death that way. In order to be crucified, indeed, the person was tied or nailed to a wooden cross and left to hang until death came through exhaustion and bleeding.

In such context, I believe, if anyone were given the opportunity to escape the cross, he certainly would do it. But, what is admirable and worthy of our praise is the fact that Jesus willingly accepted to die on the cross for the salvation of the world.

That is why St Paul says that, though he was in the form of God, he emptied himself by coming in human likeness; he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on the cross. Because of that obedience, God greatly exalted him and put his name above all names so that every tongue may confess him as Lord.

In fact, by accepting to die the excruciating death of the cross, Jesus has shown without ambiguity how much he loves us. As he says, there is no greater love than that which lays down one's life for his friends (John 15:13). By accepting to die on the cross, Jesus has sanctified the wood of the cross with his blood and made it an instrument of God's blessing to the world.

That is why the cross, originally considered as a symbol of horror, has become for us a sign of love and a tree of life. It means a lot for us as Christians and disciples of Jesus. As St Paul says in the letter to the Galatians, "may I never boast of anything but the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ". The cross, then, reminds us of the love without limit that God has for the world to the point of sending his Son to die for us. Through the death of Jesus on the cross, God has once and for all reconciled us with him through the blood of his Son.

Therefore, the cross is the ultimate consecration of God's love for us. Like the people of Israel who were healed from the biting of the snakes by gazing on the serpent of bronze, so are saved all those who believe in Jesus Christ lifted on the wood of the cross.

The crucified Jesus reassures us that "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might have eternal life. Whoever believes in him will not be condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God". In that sense, we understand that it is God's will that we might be saved. Moreover, it is not Christ who condemns us, but we condemn ourselves when we do not live in a Christian manner. That is why each one of our acts should be considered very seriously, because they will yield consequences for eternity.

But, how many times we have missed opportunities to make peace with God, our fellows and ourselves! How many times we have preferred darkness to the light of Christ! As human experience has shown, human history is repeatedly the same with its range of stubbornness and lack of openness to God's grace. And yet, God's mercy is always at hand. His door is always open to welcome us. That is what the cross means, namely that God loves us and wants us to come back to him through our faith in Jesus Christ.

Let us adore the crucified Jesus who has brought us salvation through his death on the cross. Let us bear our own daily crosses with patience in his footsteps. Let us pray that God may help us to love him as he has loved us by sending us his son as our savior. May God bless you all!

Numbers 21: 4b-9; Philipians 2: 6-11; Matthew 20: 1-16a



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