

## Readings for the Feast of the Exultation of Jesus' Cross

FIRST READING: Numbers 21:4b-9

A reading from the Book of Numbers:

With their patience worn out by the journey, the people complained against God and Moses, "Why have you brought us up from Egypt to die in this desert, where there is no food or water? We are disgusted with this wretched food!" In punishment the LORD sent among the people saraph serpents, which bit the people so that many of them died. Then the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned in complaining against the LORD and you. Pray the LORD to take the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people, and the LORD said to Moses, "Make a saraph and mount it on a pole, and if any who have been bitten look at it, they will live." Moses accordingly made a bronze serpent and mounted it on a pole, and whenever anyone who had been bitten by a serpent looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 78:1bc-2, 34-35, 36-37, 38

***Do not forget the works of the Lord!***

Hearken, my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth. I will open my mouth in a parable, I will utter mysteries from of old.

***Do not forget the works of the Lord!***

While he slew them they sought him and inquired after God again, Remembering that God was their rock and the Most High God, their redeemer.

***Do not forget the works of the Lord!***

But they flattered him with their mouths and lied to him with their tongues, Though their hearts were not steadfast toward him, nor were they faithful to his covenant.

***Do not forget the works of the Lord!***

But he, being merciful, forgave their sin and destroyed them not; Often he turned back his anger and let none of his wrath be roused.

***Do not forget the works of the Lord!***

SECOND READING: Philippians 2:6-11

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Philippians:

Brothers and sisters: Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee

should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The word of the Lord.

GOSPEL: John 3:13-17

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to John:

Jesus said to Nicodemus: "No one has gone up to heaven except the one who has come down from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

The Gospel of the Lord.

### **Reflection for the Feast of the Exultation of Jesus' Cross**

Today's feast is very old. September fourteen has been the Feast of the Holy Cross since the Seventh Century (600s). Today we accept the significance of Jesus' death on the cross for our salvation without thought or pause. In the days of Paul, however, it was a different situation. The early Church was too close to the event of Jesus' death. They rarely mentioned the word cross; it was too painful and scandalous. That God chose such a death, was not seen as a powerful gift of love but rather it showed the great sins of the human race. Paul stressed the fact that the cross was the means God chose for Jesus to save us and could be celebrated as a symbol of hope, not shame. The cross, a means of torture and death led to our salvation and Jesus rising from the dead. The passage from Philippians was ground breaking. It led directly to our sense of Jesus' sacrifice and triumph over sin and death. This reading is most appropriate for today's feast and our reflection.

The snake sheds its skin in order to grow larger. Often the shed and dead snake skin is wholly intact, an inside out version of the snake. Many cultures have seen the snake skin shedding process and the snake's inner ability of providing new life. For us the snake, as the biblical image of the serpent, represents not new life or resurrection but sin, evil and death. The snake stood as a symbol of life, renewal, and resurrection in Mesoamerica. The Catholic, Spanish Conquistadores interpreted the native religions as devil worship and needed to be suppressed as evil.

The reading from Numbers today reveals that, for the ancient Hebrews, the serpent or snake was also revered as a sign of God's justice, mercy and healing. This is despite the fact that God inflicted the snakes to bite, poison and kill God's people as punishment for complaining about food and service. Rebellion, punishment and reconciliation between God and God's people are a common theme and movement in the Old Testament. It may seem pretty dysfunctional, by our standards, but it speaks deeply of the human condition and of God's compassion and mercy. People are always ready to sin and God is always ready to forgive.

The means of reconciliation is the symbol of the cause of the calamity, the snake. A snake was molded of bronze and mounted on a pole. It became a symbol of human capacity to rebel and sin and God's capacity to heal and forgive the fractured, human heart and soul. Those who died as a result of a snake bite did not benefit from the bronze snake on a stick for being dead they couldn't look at it to be healed. God was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They were dead and in God's loving arms. So were those who died as a result of their tragic snake bite. This event occurred just as the people were about to enter the Promised Land. Those who entered were ones whom God had saved.

English is a curious language. We have singular and plural words. Most of the time, we can tell the difference easily. Car and cars, finger and fingers, sheep and sheep. What? Yes, our rules are not universal. Word meaning can be ambivalent. Today's gospel employs a subtle change that we will not hear. The second person pronoun is one of the ambivalent words. You can be either singular or plural. The story began with a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. In Greek, the original language of the gospel of John, the singular and plural words are different. In Greek, the subjective pronoun is contained in the verb, as in many modern languages.

Jesus shifted his message from Nicodemus to us. I will note that the editors of the lectionary left out three verses from this gospel. Some of that context was lost. Only John uses Jesus' personal conversations as a means to speak directly to those who either read or hear the passages. Jesus just didn't teach and explain to Old Nick, we are included as Jesus' audience or congregation. I will also add that the name Nicodemus has significance. It is a Greek name meaning victory of the people. Today's feast is the victory of God for the human race. His name was no accident.

The gospel of John makes reference to the lifting up of Jesus on the cross three times. This is the first. It compares the cross to the pole mounted bronze serpent. The means of suffering became the means of triumph. In 1973, the old Sacramentary changed the name of today's feast to the Triumph of the Holy Cross. Its revision to our current Roman Missal has reverted to its former title. What's in a name? Triumph is something Jesus won for us. This was exactly what Jesus had done. Exaltation is something we do.

This is my opinion and the manner in which I approach the cross of Jesus. I prefer to accept the gift that Jesus has won, salvation, for us. What I do is give witness to Jesus' gift. What I have to offer back adds nothing to what Jesus did. The old Sacramentary put it well in the fourth common preface. "You have no need of our praise, yet our desire to thank you is itself your gift." This gospel contains the critical element for our salvation. "God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life." Since we believe, having received God's gift of Faith, God has saved us too.

In the gospel of John, the world can be different things. Here Jesus meant creation, especially the human race. In other places the world can mean those who refuse to believe in Jesus. Those are the people we place in God's loving arms for God gives faith in God's own time, not ours. Jesus died once and for all. He will never die again, but the effects of his death continue to spread in the lives of people whom God will bring to faith, as only God will act. God is love, infinite, eternal and unconditional. God seeks salvation for all sinners.

We make the sign of the cross as we begin our liturgy and prayers. Baseball players may make it as they come to bat. I make it before I proclaim the gospel and preach. We can have crucifixes on our walls and wear crosses around our necks. These are reminders for us of what Jesus has won. They remind us how Jesus saved us. In Church, we have the altar. It is the remembrance. Around it we gather as God's children to become Jesus mystical body and blood, his Church. There it becomes our dining room table where we approach to share the Eucharist. It is Jesus cross. For we also gather around it as if we were there at Jesus' cross to witness his death. It also becomes the empty tomb where we witness Jesus' rising. It is the mountain in Galilee where we gather to witness Jesus return to the Father. It is also the upper room where we receive the Spirit as on Pentecost. The cross has been the way that Jesus has entered, intimately, into our lives.

May we live the salvation Jesus has won for us by his cross,

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