

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Sep 14th 2014

Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross

Why do we Christians insist on celebrating the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross?

Non-believers looking at the cross see nothing but a symbol of total defeat for Jesus. They see a life ignominiously cut short by torture and death and wonder why we Christians focus on this aspect. Why not focus, for example, on the perennial value of Jesus' teaching and example, rather than on this rather embarrassing end to his life?

But we Christians insist on exalting the cross of Christ. We even choose the cross as the central symbol of our faith, more significant than any other symbol!

Why?

Paul's reflection in Phillipians expresses the significance of the cross better than any text in Christian scripture. Jesus' cross becomes the occasion for his transformation: "He humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Because of this, God greatly exalted him." For Paul, Jesus' embracing his cross is the occasion for his restoration to his divine dignity and glory with the Father -- not defeat but triumph!

Today's Old Testament passage gives some insight into this mystery. The Hebrews, in their wanderings in the desert — and their escape from slavery under the Egyptians -- complained to Moses about the living conditions. God punished the Hebrews by sending poisonous snakes. Many died. Then Moses' prayed to God. God instructed Moses to mount a bronze serpent on a pole and assured Moses that whoever was bitten and looked looked up at the bronze serpent would be saved from death. And indeed they were! To this day, it should be noted, that the bronze serpent remains the symbol of medical healing professions.

The Gospel, echoing the Old Testament story, assures us Christians that by keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus raised up and mounted upon the cross we too will be saved from death: "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." John deftly uses this passage to help us Christians understand the significance of Jesus' death for us. Jesus, like the bronze serpent, was lifted up on a pole. John assures us that whoever believes and gazes on Jesus lifted up will never perish but will have eternal life.

But it's even better than this. How many Christians can witness to personal experiences of gazing up at Jesus on the cross, praying for strength to make it through sufferings — and experiencing Jesus' presence. This presence with Jesus -- sharing, as it were, his eternal life -- becomes the strength we need, not only to live through our sufferings, but to be transformed by them to a deeper union with Jesus. Paul continually assures us in many of his letters that no possible suffering can separate us from the love of Christ.

This truth is the heart of our salvation by Jesus Christ. Have we reached maturity as Christians until we can witness personally to strength in suffering through faith in Jesus?

And so today rightly we celebrate the Exaltation of the Holy Cross.

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