

Commentary on the Gospel for Mon, Sep 14th 2015

Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross

The Book of Numbers, one of the five books of the Pentateuch, retells various important historical events in the life of Israel as God's Holy People. The section of Numbers from which today's First Reading comes, is a narrative of the wanderings of the community after being freed from Egypt. Moses and his brother, Aaron, are the leaders and the two members of the Complaint Department. In the chapter previous to the one from which we read today, the people begin complaining about not being cared for by God. Moses and his brother take the grumblings to prayer and God instructs Moses to strike a near-by rock with a stick and water will begin flowing. He does it and the rock does it and the people do their temporary rejoicing in the giving God.

We hear today about another community-grumbling session. They have engaged a Canaanite king and his army and their victory gives them a new land which does have an old problem. There is no water here either. This time they directly blame God as well as Moses and Aaron. God becomes angry with their lack of faith and sends a plague of stinging snakes to bite and kill the very people God has loved into freedom.

Moses intercedes for relief and God gives a second instruction which will require faith for them to find that relief. A rather simple, life-saving invitation is given through Moses to the people. All one has to do is look at the serpent dangling on the pole.

Today's Second Reading is actually a hymn which the writer places in this Letter to the Philippians. In its few verses there is a short history of the Incarnation, the life-death of Jesus as servant, and the Resurrection. It ends with our human response to it all. It should not be read quickly, but enjoyed reverently.

The Gospel is a few verses taken from the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus who is a Jewish religious leader who tentatively is interested in Jesus and his ways. Nicodemus does get an earful. What we hear is John having Jesus recall the historic event of the saving of the Jewish believers by their gazing at the snake-on-the pole in the desert. We hear of those afflicted being healed. Then Jesus fleshes out how that saving history continues in the life-giving life of Jesus.

In contrast to the Jewish sufferers looking at the pole, Jesus replaces looking with believing. The world, God's creation, is not to be uncreated because of the sting of sin but the world might be saved

through Jesus suspended on a pole.

There are several meanings available for the feast of the Triumph or Exaltation of the Cross. It was known that the Romans and some of the Jewish leaders wanted to pile up earth upon the place of Jesus' burial. In the year 348, the mother of the great conqueror, Constantine, St. Helena, went to Jerusalem to uncover, excavate, the site. She, it is held, found the true Cross buried under the mounded-up dirt. So that finding would be the beginning of such a feast.

It is also a kind of mid-year "Little Easter" where the Church is reminded why it is a Church. The Cross, as embraced by Jesus, is the symbol of God's embracing of the earth/soil and humanity into which that Cross was and is plunged. We exalt the Cross, because it triumphs or trumps any other name, that is above any other name we are tempted to give ourselves or others. The church, when she lives out her true identity, continues exalting the Cross under which we live and labor to bring about the exaltation of the Loving God. We live "That every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." Amen!

Larry Gillick, S.J.-Creighton University's Deglman Center for Ignatian Spirituality