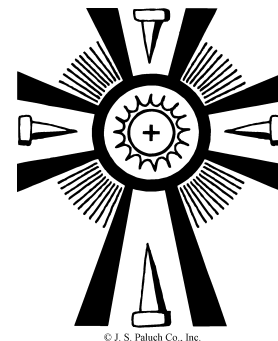


Exaltation of the Cross 24thA

September 14, 2008

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Numbers 21:4b-9 Philippians 2:6-11 John 3:13-17



“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes may have eternal life.” What powerful imagery! Poetry is the language of love, and it most often begins with an image to lead us into that deeper reality which is love. There is so much poetry and love in the imagery of the Scriptures – and in these passages. How could it be otherwise? Scripture is God’s Word. This is also one of the few Sundays all three readings carry the same theme. (Most Sundays, the first and third are thematic, but not the second. Why so? Who knows? I don’t).

I have no intention this morning to attempt a thorough study of what this image means. I will leave you with idea that has stayed with me. The snake is the symbol of the sinfulness and deceit that is in all of us, our walking away from God, and the Cross is the symbol of our redemption.

The people were on a great exodus through the desert to the Promised Land, but they were bitten by serpents and dying. Moses asks God to save them. God gave some strange instructions: make a symbol of a serpent and mount it on a pole. Anyone who has been bitten will be made well if they simply gaze on it.

Why such a command? Why would a snakebite victim be cured by gazing at a snake image? Consider the snakebites as the same thing as looking at the nature of sin. The people had revolted against God and Moses. In the story, God punished them for this. He sent snakes to bite them. But the snakebites are not as vindictive as they might at first seem. They are not paybacks from a resentful God. The pain of the fiery snakebite is a symbol of the hurt by

distancing oneself from God. Human beings are designed to be close to God's love, not far from it. The people recognize the error of their ways, and beg God for mercy.

God does not take away the serpents or the bites. Instead he has the people gaze at the very snake which is the symbol of their sin. Moses had made the serpent out of bronze, so it had no sting. They could gaze on it without dying. They could witness their wrongdoing taken up into the splendor of God's on-going love and then being forgiven. Their God who is our God is not a vengeful God, hard concept for some to accept even as adults.

In the Gospel we find Jesus speaking of how he must be "lifted up" on the cross so that all who gaze on him will see their sins and refusals, along with the inevitable painful results. They will, however, understand them as forgiven through the healing power of Jesus on the Cross.

How do we view the crucifix? A symbol only too familiar to many of us when we grew up with a crucifix somewhere in our homes as well as in our churches. And let us not forget the great art of the centuries. Only there is no snake on those crucifixes around us but the battered body of our Lord who has taken our sins upon himself.

I was struck recently when a young man, obviously touched by some interior struggle, cried out, "Why do I have to be reminded of the cross all the time?" Was he blaming God? Was he blaming himself? – perhaps both? I wonder what it would mean were we to simply ask the same thing: why be bothered and reminded once more or many times? I ask the question because I cannot help but wonder how frequently do I look to the cross and the healing promised in Christ once hanging on that cross for me and my salvation. It is so easy to be distracted with other things. What a pity!

Paul reminds us in the second reading today that "*Jesus...did not regard equality with God to be grasped*"...but "*he emptied himself, taking the form of a*

slave, coming in human likeness,...he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even the death on a cross." Are these words to be glossed over or does God's word mean little to us? Are they like so many other things we hear from the pulpit, pious platitudes to us, nice reminders once in awhile of Jesus? I am not accusing anyone of anything, only reminding all of us how much we take life's gifts for granted. It took that cry of pain from another human being to remind me once more of what Christ on the cross might mean in my life. He gave his life that I, and *"everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."*

We at times may take it for granted and not revere it as we might. There is that snake in all of us, our sinfulness, all those temptations, distractions, things which cause us to not want to or even look at the cross rather than place ourselves at least at the foot of the Cross on which Christ hanged because of us. Christ on the Cross is the very symbol of healing and resurrection. We know there is no resurrection without death. Death was never meant to be an end because of what one person, Jesus Christ, accomplished for us in the total sacrifice of himself for you and me on that Cross. The Church wants us today to give the Cross an exalted place in our hearts.

Centuries ago, a wise man wrote: *"All of our power is in the power of Christ who was crucified; and all our exaltation and all our glory are in the humility of God, who humbled himself to such an extent that he was pleased to die even between evil-doers and thieves."*

We have in our tradition practices and devotions to remind us of what was just said in the simple practice of the Sign of the Cross. I always enjoy watching a little child make the sign of the Cross. What is important to me is not how often we do it – to some it is a precious sacramental; to others it means little – but how we do it when we do it. We begin Eucharist with it; we end Eucharist with it. You noticed the priest at this altar before reading the

Gospel will sign the book, or the forehead, the lips, the heart. There are many other times, as well, the administration of the Sacraments, like Baptism, the Sacrament of Healing, and so on down to the simple sign of the cross before meals.

The image of the cross shows the reconciliation and with it the friendship into which God has entered into our lives and we with God. When we make this sign, we are saying 'Thank you' for the gift you have given us, Lord, in giving yourself over to the Cross. The Church honors this gift in this celebration Sunday of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross.

I end, adapting a prayer of one our Jesuit Saints (Alphonsus Rodriguez):

Through your most holy passion and death, your Cross,
I beg you, Lord, to grant me a most holy life,
and most complete death to all my vices and passions and self-love,
and to grant me sight of your holy faith, hope, and charity.
Amen.