

Commentary on Sunday Scripture

The Exaltation of the Holy Cross

First reading:

(Numbers 21.4-9)

The Healing Snake

This story tells of a bronze snake that was long kept in the Temple at Jerusalem as a reminder of God's healing power. which lasts from age to age. Eventually, in a purge of dubious objects of veneration, the reforming king Hezekiah decided that the snake was idolatrous, and destroyed it.

One still sometimes sees a snake curled round a stake as a medical sign, a promise of healing. The Church sees that healing sign as a preparation for the great healing sign of the Cross. During Lent and Passiontide, we remember the Cross chiefly for the suffering of Christ. Now, months later, we can celebrate the triumph of its healing power and the triumph of Christ's victory.

The Feast originates in the victory of the Christian emperor Heraclius, when he won back from the pagan Persian a great relic of the Cross they had taken from Jerusalem. The crucifixes hanging in our homes must be seen as symbols not only of Christ's suffering, but, above all, of his triumph over death.

Question:

How should Jesus be represented on the Cross, in triumph or in suffering?

Second reading:

(Philippians 2.6-11)

Christ, the second Adam

This lovely reading seems to be a very early Christian hymn that Paul had heard and incorporated into his letter. It contrasts the first Adam with the second Adam, Jesus Christ. The first Adam, the representative of the whole human race, tried to be like God. He wanted to escape death. He was disobedient and was humiliated.

The second Adam, the founder of the new humanity and first fruits from the dead, was in the form of God, but did not capitalize on his divinity. In full obedience to the Father, he accepted death, a humiliating death, and was raised up by the Father. The last lines give one of the fullest pictures of Christ's divinity in Paul: Christ receives the divine name, the Lord, which belongs to God alone. To Christ, every knee must bend, as it must bend only to God. And yet, this does not take away from God's glory, since - on the contrary - it is 'to the glory of God the Father'. Paul never actually calls Christ 'God', but here he shows precisely that, by attributing to him the reverence and adoration that are due only to God.

Question:

Do you find this poem an attractive centre of devotion? Why?

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Gospel:

(John 3.13-17)

The Son of Man must be Lifted Up

In this gospel reading we are listening in to a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, a Pharisee who came to Jesus by night (presumably because he did not want his colleagues to know). Do you mind your colleagues knowing that you are a Christian?

Jesus is talking about an incident during the Exodus journey, when the Israelites were struck by a plague of snakes. Moses hoisted a bronze snake on a pole as a recovery totem. It sounds superstitious, but presumably to depend on it was an expression of trust in God. Jesus now says that this snake is to be seen as a promise of the salvation to be won by trusting in his Cross.

The Cross remains our sign of victory. To wear it and welcome it is increasingly, in this increasingly material world, a statement of where our heart and our confidence lie. However, the Cross is not complete in itself. Some people find it 'morbid' or 'morose', but to Christians it contains also the victory and reassurance of the Resurrection. The Cross makes sense not by the crumpled figure on the wood, but by God's acceptance of that obedience. The triumph of the Resurrection is too glorious to be represented by anything visible.

Question: Should a fervent Christian home be dominated by representations of Christ crucified?
