

## EXALTATION OF THE CROSS

**Opening Prayer:** *God our Father, you sent your son Jesus into the world to show us how much you love us and how we ought to live our lives in relationship to you and one another. When Jesus was lifted up on the cross he said that he would draw all people to himself. Draw us to you as we gather together to break open your word. This we pray. . .*

**Sharing life:** What are you most and least grateful for this week?

**Facilitator reads focus statement:** Today we celebrate the "exaltation of the holy cross". We ponder one of the deepest mysteries of our faith: the necessity of the cross. Jesus, in order to reveal his Father's love and redeem the human race, allowed himself to die the most shameful death possible in his society, death on a cross. What are we to learn from this mystery? Every human being has to struggle with the mystery of suffering. Through our meditation on the cross we see clearly that Jesus' suffering was not without purpose and did not end in death. Jesus' suffering resulted in our redemption and in eternal life. By meditating on the cross we not only grow in our understanding of God's profound love for each one of us, but we find purpose and hope in our own suffering as well.

If you have not read the commentary prior to the meeting, consider reading it either before or after you read each reading.

### FIRST READING: Number 21:4-9

In this reading we find the Israelites tired and disgruntled from wandering in the desert. They have no water and they are disgusted with their daily diet of manna. (How would you like to have pizza everyday for forty years?) One of their hardships, snake bites is seen as punishment for their complaining. So the people realize that they have sinned and ask Moses to intervene with God on their behalf.

In the next verses which Jesus refers to in today's gospel, Moses, at God's instruction, "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 lived." Using the story of Moses and the serpent in this way is an example of what scripture scholars call *typology*. In typology an Old Testament person or event is seen to be a type, or a foreshadowing, of a New Testament person or event. Here Moses raising the serpent on the staff is seen as a type of Jesus being raised on the cross. Just as the Israelites who looked at the serpent were spared from physical death, so are those who look to Jesus and believe in him spared from spiritual death.

### RESPONSORIAL PSALM 78

This psalm is a reflection upon Israel's journey through the wilderness and how unfaithful they were to God.

### SECOND READING: Philippians 2:6-11

In this reading Paul gives us a beautiful meditation on the Exaltation of the Cross. The kenosis or self-emptying of Jesus is a voluntary and intentional renunciation of divine power and majesty for the sake of identification with human beings. The hymn is perfectly balanced between the *downward movement* leading to Jesus' death on a cross and the *upward movement* of his glorification by God and the whole cosmos. The hymn's context in the letter makes it clear that the self-emptying of Christ, which leads to the cross -- and through the cross to glory -- is the paradigm of the Christian life.

### GOSPEL: John 3:13-17

Although contemporary Christians tend to refer to the cross and resurrection as separate events, the early Church did not maintain such a distinction, but viewed them as a single mystery to be proclaimed and lived. When today's gospel refers to Jesus being "lifted up," this same rich ambiguity is evident. Jesus is lifted up in his crucifixion. He is also lifted up in the resurrection and ascension, which completes the process of his glorification. The monologue of Jesus, of which today's reading is a part, begins with a question from Nicodemus concerning Jesus' *ascension*.

To illustrate God's saving work in Jesus; John makes reference to the incident in Numbers that is the subject of the first reading. Just as looking upon the serpent brought healing to the Israelites, so looking upon Jesus will bring salvation to all who see him "lifted up." The passage closes with an affirmation to the overpowering love of God that grounds the whole mystery of Christ's self-giving, and leads the human person to faith.

### **FAITH SHARING QUESTIONS**

1. What verse, idea or image spoke to you most in the readings? Why?
2. An important characteristic of faithful discipleship is a willingness to deal with the crosses of daily life, allowing Jesus to help us to turn the painful experiences of life into opportunities for growth. Can you give an example from your life when this happened?
3. What has been or could be the biggest cross God has or might ask you to endure?
4. How do you feel about a current trend of using fancy expensive crosses as a piece of jewelry?

### **RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD**

Name one way you can act on today's scriptures. Suggestion: Spend some time reflecting on the seeming contradictions that the cross symbolizes.

### **CONCLUDE WITH PRAYERS OF PETITION AND INTERCESSION**

Especially pray for people burdened with a heavy cross. ©