

THE CROSS: WHERE SIN AND SALVATION MEET

Reflection for the Exaltation of the Holy Cross

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.

Reflecting on today’s celebration, Patricia Sanchez writes:

Today’s feast is fraught with an irony that cannot be ignored. We celebrate, we exalt an instrument of execution and a manner of death the Romans regarded as the most torturous and, for that reason, they reserved it for the worst of criminals. With no disrespect intended, had Jesus been put to death by hanging, would a noose be the object of our reverence today? Or an electric chair? A guillotine? A lethal injection? Nevertheless, and despite its obvious cruelty and infamy, the cross has become a central symbol of our faith, for it no longer represents merely a heinous act. On the contrary, because of love, the cross is the sign of our salvation and the cause of our joy.

The cross was anticipated as a salvific sign by the bronze serpent (first reading, Numbers) that, when held aloft by Moses, effected the healing of those who had been bitten by seraph serpents. Aware that a similar, albeit far greater healing was effected by Jesus for sinners, the Johannine evangelist (gospel) compared Moses’ lifting up of the bronze serpent in the desert to the lifting up of Jesus on the cross and in his resurrection. In the early Christian hymn quoted by Paul in today’s second reading (Philippians), the cross of Jesus is celebrated as the passage through which Jesus accomplished the salvation of humankind, after which and because of which he was exalted and glorified by God. We who have been saved by that cross continue to proclaim Jesus Christ is Lord!

The Cross and the Cellar

Besides its value as the sign of our salvation, the cross, according to Episcopal priest and psychologist Morton Kelsey, is also a vivid symbol of the evil that is in each of us. In an article titled “The Cross and the Cellar,” published in the anthology *Bread and Wine* (The Plough Publishing House), Kelsey suggests that each of us has an ordinary personality which we “wear” in public; however, underneath that public persona is a cellar in which we hide the refuse and rubbish which we would rather not see ourselves or let others see. Below that, there is an even deeper hold, a truly hellish place, full of dragons, demons, violence, hatred and viciousness. Through the power of the cross, this basest level of our being has thrust itself up and out of the underground cellar so that we humans may see what is in all of us and take heed. The cross is crucial because it shows what possibilities for evil lie hidden in each of us. It is the distillation of human evil in our time and place. Whenever we look upon the cross, we see not only what the love of God for sinners can do, but also what humankind can do, has done and still does to human beings.

Scratch the surface of a person, says Kelsey, and below you’ll find a beast or worse than a beast. This reality is attested to by the cross. While we may not want to believe this, history also attests to the reality of human depravity through the ages. Remember the Nazi concentration camps where 6 million Jews were systematically tortured, starved and eventually gassed to death by other human beings. Think of the Mongol hordes who murdered hundreds of thousands in their sweep across Asia. Recall the untold numbers of wars within nations, ironically called civil wars. Remember Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Waco, Columbine, Iran and, more recently, Iraq. All of these and so many other atrocities come together and

stare out at us from the cross.

Gift and Curse

As we stare back, let us not be lost in the evil, but let us not forget it, either. While we strive to keep evil in check, in our hearts and in our world, let us also never forget the love that led a good man and a beloved Son to give his life so that evil could be overcome. Perhaps that love, that great illogical, altruistic and merciful love, is best illustrated in the following story by author Brennan Manning (as told in *The Signature of Jesus*, Multnomah Publishers, Inc.). While meditating under a big tree on the bank of the Ganges, an old man saw a scorpion floating helplessly on the river. Quickly the man stretched himself out on one of the tree's long roots and reached out to try to rescue the drowning creature. As soon as he touched it, the scorpion stung him. Instinctively the man pulled away. But as soon as he regained his balance he stretched out again to save the scorpion. Again he was stung for his efforts, so badly that his hand swelled up most painfully.

A passerby who had seen all that had happened called out, "Only a fool would risk his life for the sake of such a creature." Calmly the man replied, "My friend, just because it is in the scorpion's nature to sting, that does not change my nature to save." Manning suggests that the symbol of the cross speaks a similar lesson. To the passerby who sees Jesus stretched out on its beams in order to save sinful humankind and who shouts, "Only a madman would risk his life for the sake of such creatures," one can almost hear Jesus answer: "My friend, just because it is humankind's nature to sin and wound, that does not change my nature to save."

And so it was that sin and salvation met on the cross that long-ago day in Jerusalem. Salvation stretched out his arms to save those who had given themselves over to sin, and by that act of selfless love and through that sacrificial death, we are healed; we are saved. Scorpion-sinners all, we are set free from ourselves and our sin. Sign of our nature—yes, such is the cross. But it is also the sign of God's nature, and therein lies the cause of our exultation.

Fr. Richard Fragomeni offers the following reflections on today's feast.

He Emptied Himself

The cross is the ultimate demonstration of the nature of God. The reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians describes the kenosis, the emptying of Christ. He gave of himself even to death on the cross. This is characteristic not only of the man Jesus but of the God head. Creation is the first example of divine emptying; redemption is the ultimate example. Unlike Good Friday when we stand before the stark cross and mourn the death of our innocent Messiah, today we stand before the glorious cross and praise God for God's incomprehensible goodness toward us. God's graciousness is poured out indiscriminately, prodigally, as only profound love can be given. Such is the nature of our God, and the cross is the symbol of this nature.

The Sign of Healing

The readings play with the symbolism of the pole on which the bronze serpent hung. In the wilderness it was merely a pole. Jesus compares it to the cross that becomes the source of our healing. As painful as life's crosses may be, they serve to transform us. They strip away what is superficial and they give us insight into the true meaning of life. They are the testing ground of virtue, the fire within which we are refined. The cross may at times be bitter medicine, but it can combat the human weakness that eats away our goodness. It can be our hope in the midst of pain and suffering and brokenness, because it promises to carry us into new life.

Our Access to God

It was through the cross that Jesus conquered sin and death and won for us access to God. It is through the

cross that we die to sin and rise to new life in Christ. Through the goodness of God, which has been poured out for us, we have been granted eternal life. It is incomprehensible to think that death is the way to life, but that is the message of this feast. The cross, which is a sign of shame and misery, is now a symbol of glory and exaltation.