

This Sunday's Readings – Exaltation of the Holy Cross – Today's readings are as follows:

- Numbers 21:4b-9
- Psalm 78:1bc-2, 34-35, 36-37, 38
- Philippians 2:6-11
- John 3:13-17

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. Since this a feast of Our Lord, it takes precedence over the 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time. Fr. Roger Karban in his 1997 syndicated column gives us some background regarding this feast – “Early Christians never saw a crucifix depicting a suffering Jesus. During the first centuries, Jesus’ followers used only a "crux gemmata:" a jeweled cross. Though shaped like a regular crucifix, its wood was adorned with jewels and gems instead of a mangled, writhing body. The wood symbolized Jesus’ suffering and death; the jewels, His resurrection. Our modern crucifix, portraying a suffering Jesus, probably is an accurate depiction of what happened on Golgotha, just outside the walls of Jerusalem on Good Friday, almost 2,000 years ago. Any Passover pilgrim coming on the scene that afternoon could have painted or carved such a crucifix. But no matter how historically accurate, a crucifix displaying a suffering Jesus isn't a fully "Christian" symbol. To be a Christian symbol, an image must be more than historically accurate. It must convey the Christian significance of the event or action it depicts. Jesus' suffering and death on the cross has meaning for us only because He later rose from the death which the cross brought about. A crux gemmata perfectly proclaims the contradiction which lies at the heart of our Christian faith: only those who die with Jesus will come to life with Jesus. If a crucifix doesn't convey death and resurrection -- at the same time, in the same symbol -- it isn't fully Christian. That's why the Church calls Sunday's feast the Triumph of the cross, and not just "the Cross." The very act which defeats us brings us victory”.

The first reading is from the Book of Numbers (4th book of the Pentateuch). The name is derived from the two censuses of the Israelites – one at the beginning of the journey at Sinai and the other at the end of the journey on the borders of the Promised Land. It spans a period of 38 years from Sinai to the Promised Land. However, it is not just history that is recounted. It is also a book of law for all the legal ordinances that were developed during that period of time. This book, as all the books of the Pentateuch, was attributed to Moses. However, it was not written down until the time of David. This particular reading recounts an episode where the people of Israel complain to God. They feel abandoned and lose faith in God. For this they are punished. Punishment was in the form of poisonous snakes. Many people were bitten and many died. The people, seeing their mistake, repented. God then had Moses create a bronze serpent, mount it on a pole, and whoever was bitten by the serpents and looked upon the bronze serpent was saved. Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* further explains the symbolism of the snake – “No doubt this story has primitive origins in a Canaanite snake cult that was fostered in Israel until Hezekiah’s reformation ([2 Kings 18:4](#)). But the story has been taken over into the religion of YHWH and purified of its cultic associations. The bronze serpent becomes a sign of YHWH healing presence.” There is a direct relation between this reading and today’s Gospel reading.

In the Gospel reading from John, we read the story of Nicodemus, a Pharisee. Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* gives us some background regarding this reading - The conversation with Nicodemus is the first discourse in the Fourth Gospel. It is typical of this evangelist's procedure. He takes an incident in the life of our Lord from his tradition, here an encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus (there is good reason to think that this encounter, as a historical occasion, belonged to the later part of the ministry, shortly before the passion)". Nicodemus was a God fearing and just man, unlike most of the Pharisees, who sought out Jesus in private. He was afraid that if his Pharisee brothers caught him talking to Jesus, he would be in trouble. In this discourse with Nicodemus, Jesus makes reference to the story in today's first reading. In the first reading, those who looked upon the bronze serpent on the pole lived. In the Gospel reading, those who look upon Jesus on the cross will be saved. Reginald H. Fuller adds this additional commentary - "In the opening saying about the serpent and the Son of man, we have an interesting interpretation of the cross. There are several presentations of the atonement in the New Testament, but the one given here is frequently overlooked. It is almost an Abelardian interpretation. The very sight of Christ lifted up on the cross has power to bring men and women to faith and repentance, just as the contemplation of the serpent lifted up on the pole by Moses (Num 21:9ff) was able to heal the Israelites who had been bitten by fiery serpents".

John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle B* gives this very interesting commentary on today's Gospel reading - One familiar sign waved by spectators at sports events in hopes that television cameras will transmit their message is: "John 3:16." A favorite of many Christians, this verse states: "Gcd so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life."

CONTEXT OF THE GOSPEL

Torn from its context (the entire Gospel of John and the Johannine community), this verse presents a heartwarming thought. The fuller literary context, as reported in today's reading, darkens the picture: "people loved darkness rather than light" (John 3:19). For John, the term "world" carries a negative meaning. The world is at odds with Jesus (16:20; 17:14, 16; 18:36) and with his Spirit (14:17; 16:8-11). Worse, it hates Jesus and those who believe in and follow after him (7:7; 15:18-19; 16:20). That the inhabitants of the world preferred darkness to light earns them the name "children of darkness" (12:35-36). For this reason, Jesus refuses to pray for the world; instead, he defeats the world (16:33). Contemporary Christians, like those who wave the "John 3:16" signs at sporting events, ought to heed the caution of the eminent Johannine scholar Raymond Brown, against the naiveté that this passage sometimes engenders. The world is not exclusively neutral, nor is it patiently awaiting good news. There are many who are actively hostile to Jesus, to Christianity and its message. Encountering the disbelief of the "world" was a shocking experience for the Johannine Christians. This knowledge should help their contemporary descendants to be forewarned and forearmed.

CONTEXT OF JOHN 3

Today's verses are selected from a more extensive discussion that Jesus had with Nicodemus, a Pharisee and "ruler" or "religious authority" among the Judeans of the house of Israel. He was attracted to Jesus, but approaching him at night suggests that Nicodemus was trying to hide his interest (3:2). Anyone at all familiar with the nosy Mediterranean world where privacy is practically nonexistent can sympathize with Nicodemus' strategy to protect his reputation, his honor. Once ruined or lost, a reputation or honor cannot be regained. But the discussion reported and interpreted by John runs in a circle because of Nicodemus' apparent failure to understand Jesus' use of a Greek word with two meanings: "again" and "from above" (3:3-9). Nicodemus typifies many who came to Jesus but had difficulty understanding him at first. Some never understood him (see John 2:23-25). To his credit, though, Nicodemus seems to have pondered and perhaps even pursued his interest in Jesus further, no doubt in discussion with others in typically Mediterranean, group-centered fashion. Later in the Gospel (7:37-44), Jesus' statements in the Temple prompt a divided response in his audience. Some believe in him, and others want to arrest him. The chief priests and Pharisees are disappointed and taunt and insult the Temple police for not arresting Jesus. At this moment, Nicodemus exposes himself to shame by defending Jesus' right to a hearing (vv. 50-51). Shame is not long in coming: "Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you?" ask his fellow Pharisees derisively. Nicodemus the night visitor has now gone one step further, to daytime defender of Jesus, at least indirectly. The final appearance of Nicodemus in John's Gospel makes his spiritual journey appear to be complete. When Jesus dies, Nicodemus comes forward publicly with myrrh and aloes to anoint the body. He joins Joseph of Arimathea, a secret disciple of Jesus who feared the Judeans, and both of them see to the burial of Jesus' corpse (19:38-42). This final appearance of Nicodemus illustrates John 3:14: "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life," and John 12:32: "And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself." Lent is an opportune time to redirect one's path to Jesus".

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