

HOMILY TRIUMPH OF THE CROSS - SUNDAY 24-A

(Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 78; Philippians 2:6-11; John 3:13-17)

Does anyone here have a medic alert bracelet? Do you know what the symbol on it means?

Look to Jesus; love as he did, and live in the reign of God.

Today's feast of the Triumph of the Cross replaces the 24th Sunday of Ordinary Time. The name of the feast itself is like a parable, in which two opposites come together to teach a profound truth. How can a cross where a violent painful death occurs be in any way considered a triumph?

The answer in part lies in the Old Testament reading this morning from the book of Numbers. After their miraculous deliverance from slavery in Egypt, the Hebrew people find themselves wandering in the desert. There, they suffer from relapse. They find it hard to understand the mysterious ways of God who often teaches us the deeper meaning of life through some suffering. They complain and want to go back to Egypt, to go back to the familiar miserable old ways instead of moving into the unknown with the Lord.

It is interesting that when Moses prays to the Lord to take away the scorpions that are biting the people, God instructs him instead to make a bronze serpent, lift it up on a pole, and the people who look at it will live. The bronze serpent has no poison in it. What a powerful image of Jesus, who has no sin, no addiction in him. Already, centuries before the time of Christ, God was teaching the people to look forward to a savior raised on a cross who would truly save them and liberate them. That is the symbol on medic alert bracelets to this day – a serpent on a standard, a symbol of healing and genuine liberation.

When the people had finally learned this lesson in the desert, to trust in the figure on a cross, and a second lesson to live one day at a time (manna in the morning and quail in the evening, without saving any for the next day), the Hebrew people were ready to cross over into the Promised Land.

St. Paul in the second reading, writing from his privileged position of having experienced the forgiveness and compassionate love of Jesus during his own encounter with the Risen Lord on the road to Damascus, shares his understanding of this mystery of the cross in the beautiful hymn to the Philippians. The love of God for us was made known in the *kenosis*, the self-emptying of Jesus who accepted the cross to show us the depth of God's love and the power of the love that could overcome all forms of sin and even death itself. We are now called to bow down, to believe in and adore and worship this Jesus who is Lord of all, to the glory of God the Father. The cross is now transformed into the way to a new life with God.

It is this new life that Nicodemus is seeking as he meets with Jesus under cover of darkness. Jesus gently reminds him of the lesson in the desert that his ancestors learned about a figure to be raised up on a cross, calls him to believe in that figure, and he would have eternal life. Jesus goes on to tell him that God's love for us and for him is revealed through the cross, a love that seeks to forgive, to save, to heal, to liberate. It is a love that invites into the fullness of life with God, not just after death but here and now in the present. Those who truly believe will have eternal life.

In doing so, the Son of Man moves between heaven and earth and brings the two together. John has three statements of lifting up that balance the three passion predictions of the synoptic gospels. The overlap of crucifixion and exaltation is critical for John's soteriology, or theology of salvation. For John, Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection and ascension is one continuous event. His theology of the cross lies in the fact that there is no exaltation apart from the crucifixion. The Son of Man's ascent to heaven is salvific, has saving power, because he is the one who has descended from heaven.

Eternal Life is one of the dominant metaphors in the Fourth Gospel to describe the change in human existence wrought by faith in Jesus. To have eternal life is to live life no longer defined by blood or by the will of the flesh or by human will but by God.

The alternative to eternal life is to perish. There is no middle ground for John. God's gift of Jesus that culminates in Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension, decisively alters the options available to the world. If one believes, one's present is altered by the gift of eternal life; if one does not believe, one perishes. God's gift of Jesus to the world thus begins the judgment of the world that is not a cosmic future event, but is underway in the present, initiated by Jesus' coming into the world.

The reader must allow himself or herself to be reshaped by what the text says and does rather than reshaping the text to fit the interpreter's needs or preconceptions. This is unsettling, but mirrors what Jesus does in the text. Jesus asks Nicodemus to let go of what he knows in order to be reborn through what Jesus has to offer.

Someone who grasped this mystery of the triumph of the cross has to be Mr. Theresa of Calcutta. After her death, it was revealed by her letters that she, whom everyone thought must be experiencing the consolation and joy of God's presence, was for almost 60 years experiencing the apparent absence of God. That stark spiritual reality was a hidden cross that she carried all those years. This news was shocking to many. Those who do not understand the mysterious ways of God would even judge her as lacking in faith. To the mystics, however, this would be normal. This testing by God of the genuineness of a faith that does not depend on warm holy feelings is a grace given to a chosen few, those who are heroes and heroines in the spiritual life. And Mother Theresa was one of them. The rest of us with much weaker faith have to pray, as we do in the Our Father, that God will not put us to that test.

The Eucharist that we celebrate now makes present for us that same unconditional love of God that Jesus showed for us on the Cross through his passion, death and resurrection.

May our participation in this mystery deepen our faith in Jesus, help us to love as he did and empower us to live in the reign of God here and now. May God bless us all.