

Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross

John 3:13-17

13 Jesus said to Nicodemus:

'No-one has gone up to heaven except the one who came down from heaven, the Son of Man who is in heaven; 14 and the Son of Man must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, 15 so that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. 16 Yes, God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life. 17 For God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but so that through him the world might be saved.'

Other readings: Numbers 21:4-9 Psalm 77 (78) Philippians 2:6-11

The Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross takes precedence over the ordinary Sunday Mass because it is a feast of the Lord. Bringing together the cross and 'exaltation' suggests immediately that the focus is on the paschal mystery of the death and resurrection of the Lord. It is true that this is the focus of every Mass. This feast originated in Jerusalem with the discovery of the true cross and the dedication of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

The writings of the New Testament help us to consider the true meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus. The gospel for this feast is taken from the words of Jesus to Nicodemus in the third chapter of the Gospel of John. Jesus has been speaking about being 'born from above', the new birth through water and the Holy Spirit which Christians receive in baptism. This new birth, this new life, comes from the saving work of Jesus.

Jesus alludes to the lifting up of the serpent in the desert, which is narrated in the first reading from the Book of Numbers, in reference to his own being raised up on the cross. The final statements in the gospel passage are of extraordinary significance. The coming of the Son reveals the Father's love. The Son comes not to condemn but to offer life to the world.

The cross, the traditional instrument of torture and death in the Roman empire, is transformed into the symbol of new life, the life shared by Jesus with all those who believe. It is therefore logical that the cross becomes a symbol of triumph and exaltation. How strange it would be otherwise for Christians to 'cross themselves'!

St Paul recalls in the Letter to the Philippians the example of humility given by Christ for all to follow. His self-emptying in becoming man and in accepting death on the cross leads to the new life of the resurrection.

How can a symbol of torture and death become a sign of life?

What do I need to be able to carry the cross I have been asked to bear?

Let us thank God for the love shown in the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Let us pray for a true understanding of the paschal mystery in our own lives.