

Triumph of the Cross - September 14th

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

Introduction

Public veneration of the Holy Cross dates back to the fourth century and indicates that the Cross was shown to the people as a sign of salvation and victory over evil. It celebrates the finding of the Cross by St. Helena in AD 320 and the dedication of the Basilica of the Resurrection, built by Constantine over the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem and dedicated on this day in AD 335. It also commemorates the time when the True Cross was exposed for veneration in Jerusalem by Emperor Heraclius after he recovered it from the Persians in 629.

1st Reading - Numbers 21:4-9

The book of Numbers is the 4th book of the Law (Torah). This title in our English Bibles is a direct translation of the Vulgate *Numeri* which in turn is derived from the Septuagint *Arithmoi*. It is so called because this book concerns itself with a census of God's people and shows concern for arithmetical precision in the matter of sacrificial offerings, the spoils of war, the days required for purification, and the division of territory around the Levitical cities. Our reading for today however, doesn't deal with numbers but instead again deals with the grumbling of the people during their wanderings in the desert; specifically, their journey to Moab which began about 11 months after the Israelites had arrived at Mount Sinai.

⁴ From Mount Hor they set out on the Red Sea road, to by-pass the land of Edom. But with their patience worn out by the journey, ⁵ the people complained against God and Moses, "Why have you brought us up from Egypt to die in this desert, where there is no food or water? We are disgusted with this wretched food!"

The manna. You would think that by this time the Israelites would have learned their lesson. After all, Every time they complain against Moses (and consequently, God) things happen, sometimes bad things. They complain about the food and God provides manna and quail, and when they persist in complaining, the quail become poisonous to the complainers (Numbers 11). They complain about lack of water and Moses strikes the rock and water flows forth [although Moses is informed that he will not be allowed to enter the promised land because he struck the rock with his staff rather than speaking to it as instructed by God (Numbers 20:8-12)]. Again, they are complaining and implying that God has deceived them.

⁶ In punishment the LORD sent among the people seraph serpents, which bit the people so that many of them died.

The word "seraph" means "fiery". The seraphim, the highest rank of angels, are called the "fiery ones" because they are the closest to God's fiery love. Seraphim are also depicted in Holy Scripture as winged serpents (Isaiah 6:2,8). These are emissaries of Yahweh to execute His judgements.

⁷ Then the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned in complaining against the LORD and you. Pray the LORD to take the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people, ⁸ and the LORD said to Moses, "Make a seraph and mount it on a pole, and if anyone who has been bitten looks at it, he will recover."

Looking at the image doesn't bring about a magical healing in and of itself, but the image is a reminder of God's healing love and His promise to His people (the same reason we have a crucifix today). God is the one who does the healing.

⁹ Moses accordingly 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, he recovered.

Bronze is a symbol of judgement. Archaeology has shown that the cult of the snake was widely practiced in Canaan, probably in connection with fertility rites. A bronze snake has been found in the excavations of Lachish; it dates from the Late Bronze Age, about the same time as the Exodus. Moses may have learned to make such an image from his Kenite relatives (the name "kenite" means "smith"). This incident is believed to have taken place in the vicinity of Punon which was one of the great copper sources in ancient times.

King Hezekiah destroyed the bronze serpent which Moses had made because the people been burning incense to it; it had become an object of worship rather than an aid to it (2 Kings 18:4).

Second Reading - Philippians 2:6-11

Imprisoned for his apostolic activity, St. Paul knew that the local Christians were continuing his work; the gospel was being preached. St. Paul wrote from prison to thank the Philippians for their generosity and because he had learned that Judaisers were in the area, to warn them against falling under their influence. We hear today from his exhortation to humility.

⁶ Who, though he was in the form of God,

Literally, "originally being in the form of God", He had a divine pre-existence.

did not regard equality with God something to be grasped.

Like a miser holds on to his wealth; something not to be surrendered.

⁷ Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance,

Suffered the humiliation of incarnation. Jesus, in becoming man, divested Himself, not of His divinity, but of the status of glory to which He had a right and which would be restored at His exaltation. Not only did He become a real man, but He was like all other men, without exceptional privileges.

⁸ he humbled himself,

In the second stage of His humiliation, He suffered the humiliation of death. This final stage sums up His whole life on earth and His devotion to the Father, which comes to a climax in death on the cross.

becoming obedient to death,

As to be expected of a "slave".

even death on a cross.

Not only He die like every other human, but His death was that of total humiliation; a death reserved for the lowest of the low.

⁹ Because of this, God greatly exalted him

He has received a celestial exaltation; He has been raised to the loftiest heights. The Father has exalted Him to a status that contrasts superabundantly with His condition of abasement.

and bestowed on him the name that is above every name,

The name is "Lord" which appears at the end of this reading. *Kyrios* is the Septuagint equivalent of *adonai* (my lord) which was used as the substitute for YHWH, the name of God which was not to be said.

¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus

When *Kyrios* (Lord) was pronounced.

every knee should bend,

An act of religious devotion.

of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹

All creation gives celestial exaltation. This alludes to Isaiah 45:23 and transfers to the new *Kyrios* the adoration given there to Yahweh. It is a universal and cosmic adoration paid to a sovereign.

and every tongue confess that JESUS CHRIST IS LORD,

The ancient baptismal profession of faith (1 Corinthians 12:3; Romans 10:9; Colossians 2:6). Christ died and lived again that He might be Lord both of the dead and the living (Romans 14:9).

to the glory of God the Father.

His occupying of the heavenly throne constitutes no rivalry to the Father, to Yahweh Himself; rather His voluntary abasement and the acknowledgment paid to Him by creation in his rewarded status bring honor to the Father.

Gospel John 3:13-17

Have you been born again? Our reading today comes from the conversation which Jesus had with Nicodemus, a pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin. Nicodemus had asked how he could be born again; enter into his mother's womb a second time. Jesus has told him that he must be born of water and the Spirit -- at Jesus' baptism in the first chapter of this gospel, at his water baptism, the Holy Spirit appeared in the form of a dove and came down upon him (John 1:32). Nicodemus still doesn't understand so Jesus says "You are Israel's teacher and you do not understand these things? We (Jesus and John the Baptist) speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of Heavenly things?"

¹³ No one has gone up to heaven except the one who has come down from heaven, the Son of Man.

The only one who can speak authoritatively of heavenly things is the only Person who has both come down from heaven and ascended into heaven, the Son of Man (see John 1:51).

¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,

Refers to our first reading. In Wisdom 16:6ff the bronze serpent is called the "symbol of salvation". "Lifted up" has a double significance when applied to Christ: [1] He is to be exalted (which is why we have the crucifix) ([Isaiah 52:13](#)) and [2] He must be raised on the cross in order to achieve His resurrection and ascension.

¹⁵ so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

If you truly believe, you will exalt Him and the consequence is eternal life in Him.

¹⁶ For God so loved the world

Although alienated from God, the world is not evil in itself; it remains the object of divine compassion. The only explanation that we shall ever have of the gift of eternal life (made possible for us in the redemption achieved in Christ) is the incredible love of God for the world.

that he gave his only Son,

This stresses the gratuity of God's love -- it extends even to this extreme [recall Abraham offering Isaac, his 'only son' (Genesis 22:2) which was the precursor to Jesus' offering].

so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.

There are only 2 choices: [1] Belief and eternal life or [2] Rejection and destruction -- there is no middle ground (see John 6:54).

¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.