

The Exaltation of the Holy Cross
(Numbers 21:4-9 / John 3:13-17)
14.09.2014

Today we celebrate the Solemnity of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross: our monastery's Patronal Feast.

The invitation addressed to us through the Sacred Scriptures heard this morning is an invitation to lift up our eyes to contemplate Jesus *raised up* upon the cross. It is an invitation to see Christ's cross which is *our peace* (as Paul teaches) as the source of that healing we all need to experience in our wounded lives and broken hearts.

The love of Christ crucified which we *contemplate* upon the cross, we are also called to *imitate* in our lives.

What Christ has done for us, we are invited to do in our turn, for Him and for others. That is, to love to the very end, making a total gift of our lives, holding nothing back, offering all.

It is not only what we have that we are called to give to the Lord, but, more fundamentally, everything we are.

Our gift must be so total that it includes our daring to offer to God, along with all that is good and wholesome in us, those wounded, broken areas of our lives: those parts of ourselves of which we might be more inclined to deny the existence and certainly hide from the view of others.

We must dare to offer to God our poverty, our weakness and even our sin!

We are called to reflect in the gift we make of our lives what we are given to contemplate on the cross: and that includes all of the things I have just named, those things within us of which we are ashamed. It was all this that Jesus carried for us on the tree. *He carried all that was weighing upon us.*

If, when we look at the cross, we see how Jesus carried our guilt and shame, what we are given to contemplate lifted up on Calvary is not only that, but, before and above all else, what we see there is love made manifest.

As we look to the Holy Cross, we see God's love crucified in Christ Jesus.

This contemplation which should lead to imitation should help us to make an offering of our own love crucified.

What I mean when I say that, what I am talking about here, is all the pain in our lives which is born, not of sin, but of love.

You see there are two different types of pain in our lives: pain which stems from sin and pain rooted in love.

We see Jesus bear both these types of pain on the cross.

It was sin that nailed Jesus to the tree. It was our sin that He bore on Calvary. The Scriptures go as far as to say that *He became sin for our sakes.*

But that is not all that we contemplate when we look at the crucified Christ.

What we also see in the Crucified One is Christ's passionate outpouring of love.

G.K. Chesterton spoke of *the furious love of God* being embodied in His crucified Son. In this context the word *furious* means *passionate*.

The furious love of God is His passionate love.
On Calvary we see Jesus on fire with love!

Guided by this insight, the cross appears to us then as nothing less than the fulfilment in Christ of the revelation first made to Moses in the burning bush.

As Moses fell to his knees before the sight of the burning bush, he understood God's identity to have been revealed to Him. From the bush a voice came: *I am who I am.*

Moses' vision was accompanied by the revelation of the name (the identity) of God: *I am who I am.*

Likewise, as we look to the cross this morning, God speaks to us. He says: *This is who I am: I am love! I am love for you. I am love that goes to this length for you: I am love crucified for you! I am love which, even when you spurn and reject it, even when you forget it, will never fail you and never withdraw itself from you.* Jesus says: *My love for you is so strong that I accept to die for you, not a sweet and pleasant death, a death which is just a falling asleep. No. My love for you is so strong that I accept this sad and painful death. I accept to die for you in this sorrowful, humiliated state, weakened, agonising, feeling abandoned and distressed, troubled, tormented in the very depths of my being, anguished, in pain, thirsting for your love, nakedly vulnerable, fearful in this wounded flesh, my heart torn open to show you just how much I love you.*

It is love such as this that we are called to reflect.

When we do, what we reveal is nothing other than the beauty of God's love in and through our own disfigured human lives. (And, to some extent, all our lives are disfigured.)

When we understand and claim for ourselves the love of the crucified Christ, we dare to accept and no longer deny to ourselves, or hide from others, our *real self*.

We are no longer afraid or ashamed of our own wounded, broken hearts.

We come to see the pain associated with love in our lives as a gift from God.

Like the apostle Paul we are led to rejoice in, and, we can even dare to boast of, our small *share in the sufferings of Christ*

In other words, we come to the point where we have surrendered our hearts to *reckless love*.

This is what contemplation of the cross, and especially the open heart of Jesus revealed upon the cross, calls us to live in our lives: surrender to reckless love!

Christ loved us and gave His life for us, Saint Paul writes to the Ephesians.

What Jesus' dying means for our living is shown to us here. It is resumed in one word which we are called to hear as a commandment: *love!*

You shall love!

What makes us able to live God's commandment is a personal experience of His love for us as revealed in Jesus Christ.

It is as we dare to believe that Christ loves us that we are enabled (and indeed empowered) to love Him, ourselves and others, in our turn.

The love of Christ was given not because we were worthy of it, not because we merited it, but because we needed it to become men and women of worth restored.

In so many ways we have all cheapened and degraded ourselves. We need to have our lost dignity restored to us.

It is important for us to remember that Christ's death upon the cross was followed by His descent

into hell.

This reminds us that Jesus really stoops down to us to lift us up.

This is surely a healing message for those of us who are only too aware of our miserable state and our need for God's mercy today.

There are days when we are acutely aware of our need not only to cling to the cross, but to allow the Crucified One to reach down from the cross, beckoning us to draw close to Him, so that He may hold us in His embrace, in a way that salves our pain and gives peace to our bleeding hearts.

Let me end with a word of comfort taken from the writings of a recently deceased American spiritual writer whose life journey was not an easy one.

Let us hear these words of Brennan Manning, which he shares with us as words he heard Christ spoken into his own broken heart during a time of retreat in solitude, when he was at his lowest ebb. I propose that, as we listen to them, we receive them as a message of life and love addressed to us today.

Brennan Manning explains that it was as if he heard Jesus say to him: *I know every moment of sin, selfishness, dishonesty, and degraded love that has disfigured your life, and I do not judge you unworthy of compassion, forgiveness and salvation.*

But that is not all Brennan Manning heard.

There is another line which I want to share with you. In my opinion it is a very important for us to hear this bottom line and take on board.

He heard Jesus go on to say to him: *Now, you be like that with others!*

The call of the cross is a call to show mercy and offer forgiveness.

I believe that our daring to be with others as Christ is in our regard, ready to forgive every offence or wrong ever committed, opens up a way to freedom from much of the self-inflicted pain we feel in our lives.

You see, so often we give into the temptation of *resentment*, not in the sense of harbouring bitterness, which is perhaps how we usually hear the word resentment, but in the literal sense of that word *resentment*. Literally, to resent means to feel over and over again: *re-sentir*.

There are some pains which destroy our lives, rob us of our peace and weaken us greatly, for the simple reason that we allow ourselves to feel them not once, but over and over again, to the point where we are worn out by them.

Brothers and sisters, God loves us. His love lifts us up. His love releases us from all that binds and cripples our lives. God's love heals us. It transforms and transfigures us.

Let us welcome it afresh today.

May the celebration of today's feast see us recreated, brought to new birth, for God's love is for **life!** God's love makes us live and live to the full!

Our rebirth is signalled and symbolised by the blood and water that flowed forth from Christ's open heart.

May we be bathed in that tide!

I echo a hymn that has accompanied me much these past days:

*Glory be to Jesus
who in bitter pains
poured for us the life blood
from His sacred veins!*

*Blest through endless ages
be the precious stream
which from endless torment
doth the world redeem.*

*There the fainting spirit
drink of life her fill;
there, as in a fountain,
laves herself at will.*