

The Exaltation of the Holy Cross
(Numbers 21:4-9 / John 3:13-17)
14.09.2020

The title given to today's Solemnity *The Exaltation of the Holy Cross* invites us to contemplate the cross of Jesus in a particular light. The invitation of the Gospel is to look to Jesus *lifted up, glorified*. In the optic of John's Gospel what we are bidden to celebrate today is the *Triumph of the Cross*.

Without denying that what Jesus endured upon Calvary's Hill was a profound humiliation and His death upon the tree was seen by those who looked on as nothing less than an accursed ignominy, in the light of faith, in which John presents the mystery of Christ's elevation on Calvary's Hill, the cross merits to be considered as nothing less than a sign of God's blessing.

For this very reason we bless people and we bless objects using the sign of the cross.

Lifted up upon the cross Christ is *enthroned upon the Mercy Seat*. There He is to be regarded as *exalted* rather than shamed.

Without the insight that comes from us from John's vision of the mystery of the cross, our contemplation of the Crucified One would be greatly impoverished. We might be led to see the cross as simply one more example of the many tragedies that have marked humanity's history, another painful event to have befallen our race, one more slaughter of an innocent victim; another dramatic happening in line with the murder of the just man Abel, or the extermination of so many victims of the Holocaust during the Second World, or the enormous losses incurred with the dropping of the atomic bomb upon Hiroshima, or at the time of the 9/11 attacks in the USA, or, closer to us here, in Northern Ireland, the many who died as a result of the long decades of violence which marred our land, leaving it stained by the blood of Christian brothers and sisters.

John reminds us that the cross is more than one more horrible execution. He does this by introducing the insight that what we witness at Golgotha is Christ's wondrous exaltation.

What happened upon the cross was certainly the slaughter of an innocent, but it was more than that. The One who died on Calvary was innocent like no one else before Him and no one else who has ever lived since then. Jesus who died on the cross was *God made man*. He was *the sinless One pierced through for our faults, to bring us healing*.

What happened on Calvary was more than just an expression of Christ's communion with us in our sorrow and our grief; it was more than simply a display of Jesus' solidarity with us in our suffering and our shame. It was all that, but it was more than that... and it remains more than that!

Christ's death for us was a unique divine gift. It was a grace which has made us one with God, who, in Christ, became One with us. By His life-giving death Jesus won for us our reconciliation and our peace.

Above all, we should understand that, by what Jesus lived upon the cross, we were lifted up by Christ to reign with Him.

Christ stooped down to the low level at which we live; He condescended to unite Himself with us in the very depths, where we find ourselves. He did this by the mystery of His incarnation and He did it to lift us up by the mystery of His elevation on the cross.

Christ's death upon the cross saved us from the depths of the deadly peril in which we were lost.

Paul uses the image of our being *saved from the depths* to speak of our salvation by Christ in chapter 1 of his First Letter to the Corinthians. This same notion of our being *saved from the depths* is one we find in various places throughout the Sacred Scriptures, wherein *the raging waters of the sea* are often depicted as engulfing people caught up in its waves and carry them away. In the Bible the sea is frequently perceived and presented as such a terrible menace to human life. Fear of the sea is especially prevalent in Hebrew thought. The psalmist has us sing: *He reached down from on high and took hold of me; He drew me out of deep waters.* This same verse is found nearly verbatim in 2 Samuel 22. The notion of our being *saved from the depths, drawn forth from the raging waters*, is echoed in many other places throughout the Bible: we find it in the psalter, the Book of Job and many other Old Testament passages as well. We also find it in the Gospels – just think of the disciples at risk in the boat, caught up in the storm, on the raging waters. There we see how Christ walks on the waters towards the disciples who are in a state of panic, or again is roused from His sleep in the boat to calm the storm and save them.

Evoking the importance of this sea imagery in the Bible, on today's feast of the Holy Cross, I am inclined to think of a text by the Northern Irish writer C.S. Lewis. In the lines I will quote C.S. Lewis set out to describe the significance of the incarnation of Christ, but, I see these same lines – with the images evoked therein – as equally applicable to what Christ accomplished for us by His Crucifixion.

I read from C.S. Lewis' *The Grand Miracle*:

In the Christian story God descends to re-ascend. He comes down; down from the heights of absolute being into time and space, down into humanity... down to the very roots and sea-bed of the Nature He has created.

But He goes down to come up again and bring the ruined world up with Him. One has the picture of a strong man stooping lower and lower to get Himself underneath some great complicated burden. He must stoop in order to lift, he must also disappear under the load before he incredibly straightens his back and marches off with the whole mass swaying on his shoulders.

Would it be too great a stretch of the imagination to think of Christ who fell three times on the way to Calvary as stooping down more than once to get under us, to lift us up? Would it be too much to think of the Glorious Christ, exalted upon the cross, and all the more after with His resurrection and ascension, as not only carrying us, but as lifting us up to present us (now reconciled) to His Father?

I suggest that we dare to think of the Triumphant Christ as presenting us this morning as the trophy of His victory over the enemy's power which held our fallen, wounded, broken humanity in its grip until He stooped down to lift us up.

The Risen Glorious Christ has broken the chains of death which held us captive. He has released us from sin's hold upon us.

Further on in that text from which I quoted, using the biblical image of *the depths of the sea* to which I drew attention, Lewis describes what Jesus has done for us in these terms: *One may think of a diver, first reducing himself to nakedness, then glancing in mid-air, then gone with a splash, vanished, rushing down through green and warm water into black and cold water, down through increasing pressure into the death-like region of ooze and slime and old decay; then up again, back to colour and light, his lungs almost bursting, till suddenly he breaks the surface again holding in his hand the dripping, precious thing that he went down to recover.*

So much in that text recalls the cross to us: the diver's nakedness evokes that of Jesus stripped of His garments, hanging upon the tree of shame, vulnerable in the sight of all; the diver's almost bursting lungs, evoke for me how *with a deep breath Jesus gave up His spirit* at that moment when He presented His life to the Father – at the same time, presenting our lives redeemed by His self-offering.

What Lewis sees the diver as having done when he went down into the water – *all the way down through the green and warm water to the black and cold water, polluted with the ooze and slime and old decay of this world...* This is what Jesus did when *He took our sin upon Himself, accepting to die a shameful death upon the cross for our sakes*, to win for us our glorification. In His High Priestly Prayer Jesus situated things thus when He prayed: *That they might have the glory which I had with You, Father, before the world began.*

In Paul's Letter to the Romans we read these reassuring words. *Together with Christ we are heirs of God's glory. We now possess the blessing Christ has won for us: a share in His own glory. Those He justified He also glorified.* It is as if here Paul's theology of the mystery of the cross is reconciled with that of John. Both New Testament witnesses agree to emphasise the theme of *glorying in the cross*. Writing elsewhere (in his Letter to the Galatians) Paul reminds us: *We too can glory in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

As I draw this meditation to a close, lyrics of a worship song by Dan Schutte come to mind: *Let us ever glory in the cross of Christ... The cross, our salvation and our hope. (...) Let us ever glory in the cross of Christ and the triumph of God's great love.*

The invitation addressed to us today is an invitation *to glory in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ*. May we do so with grateful and with joyful hearts!