

HOMILY FOR THE SUNDAY BEFORE THE EXALTATION OF THE HOLY CROSS

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, One God.
Amen.

Today, a day before the feast of the Exultation of the Precious and Lifegiving Cross, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, presents us with the central theme of the Gospel in a few words: God saves the world from the devil and sin, solely with endless love!

Christ explains this to us using a passage from the Book of Numbers when Moses was in the desert with the Israelites, namely chapter 21, verses 4-9.

Following God's miraculous interventions, which can be read in chapters 7 to 12 of Exodus, Moses had led the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. On their way to the promised land, those same Israelites were soon found lacking in their faith in the one true God. They soon started worshipping idols. God in trying to rectify this situation and in trying to bring the Israelites close to Him again, allowed poisonous serpents to bite them, causing many to die.

The Israelites went to Moses asking him to intercede on their behalf with God. Moses turned to God with tears and begged for the salvation of his people and their release from this terrible scourge. Moses' prayers were heard and God replied: "Make a serpent for yourself and put it on a signal pole; and it shall be if a serpent should bite someone, when the one bitten looks at it, he shall live."

This miracle-working image prefigured Christ being lifted upon the Cross. As we the faithful behold the crucified Christ in faith, the power of sin and death is overthrown in them. Just as the image of a serpent was the weapon that destroyed the power of the serpents, so the instrument of Christ's death becomes the weapon that overthrows death itself.

In today's Gospel reading we can also find a preparatory reminder for tomorrow's feast of the Exultation of the Precious and Lifegiving Cross. In one of the passages, Jesus tells us that just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of man must also be lifted up.

What Christ is doing here is using the Old Testament as a teaching tool, to show His disciples and all of us that He is the fulfilment of the Old Covenant.

Christ is showing us that just as those Israelites who were faithful were healed through this symbol of death, namely the serpent, so we are also saved through Christ who was hung upon the Cross. And while the Cross, like the serpent, was the symbol of death, it has now become the symbol of life.

In this instance, we are faced with another of those phenomenal paradoxes which we can find throughout Scripture. Other examples of these paradoxes would be 'God becomes man' or 'a virgin gives birth' etc.

Yet, as incomprehensible as some of these things may be to us, the earthly existence of the Saviour was prefigured throughout the Old Testament. Christ becomes the new Adam; Jonah in the belly of the fish foreshadows Christ in the tomb after His crucifixion, and the brass serpent prefigures the saving act of Christ's death on the Cross.

While the serpent symbolised sin and its deadly effect in the Old Testament, the brass serpent symbolised the removal of the curse and judgement of sin.

Furthermore, the metal itself was figurative of the righteousness of God's judgement. I am sure that some of you are wondering where you might have seen a serpent wrapped around a pole before. And you would be right to do so. The answer is that this symbol is still widely used in the medical profession, and can be found on ambulances, hospitals, pharmacies, and medical products all over the world. When I was a member of the Medical Service in the Belgian Armed Forces, this symbol was our cap and uniform badge.

The difference between the copper serpent on the pole and Christ's death on the cross should be clear for all. The copper serpent miraculously saved those Israelites who had been bitten from a temporal death. Christ's death on the cross was not temporal at all. In both cases, the instrument of healing was initially an instrument of death.

Christ entered death as man and defeated it as God, the Giver, and Author of Life. The very Logos of God who made all life and sustains all life emerged from death as the Victor.

When we speak of belief and God's love, we are speaking of something deeper than the intellectual or even spiritual acceptance of God. We are speaking of participation in His divine life. In the Orthodox Church this is called deification or theosis, and this is what we have been called to achieve.

Saint Peter refers to it in his Epistle as becoming "partakers of the divine nature" (II Peter 1:4). Saint Paul speaks of us becoming sons by adoption, co-heirs with Christ through our participation in His life (Ephesians 1), in the human nature He redeemed by His incarnation, His entry into that human nature. This, by the way, is why Christ is referred to as the "new Adam."

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." To understand this verse we need to visualise the cross before our own eyes.

The cross is really the supreme expression of God's love for us: God, the Maker of all, the Giver of all life, was willing to become one of His own creation, be tortured, and lifted up on the cross, undergo the most horrible, painful and long-lasting of deaths in the Roman empire, so that He could defeat sin and death on our behalf, and conquer death on our behalf. All this, so that we who have been baptised in Him and continue to live in Him may become fellow conquerors.

For this reason, we lift high the cross, we wear the cross, and tomorrow, the day of the Exultation of the Precious and Lifegiving Cross, we will venerate the icon of the Exaltation, glorifying God. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved" (John 3:16-17).

We are often told that pride is a sin, but we must proudly wear the cross, the “trophy invincible.” If we ever boast in anything, then let us boast in the cross, and, as Christ commands and models for us, we must deny ourselves, we must take up our own symbolic cross and strive to live for Him and proclaim His Truth in this world, regardless of the rejection that may be heaped upon us.

We must follow Him, we must live in Him. We must live a life where we put Him above everything temporal and material in this world so that we can be saved. Let us not forget the words of Saint Paul, who proclaims, “God forbid that I should glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal. 6:14).

In today’s Gospel, Jesus, speaking of Himself, draws a direct connection between the serpent on the pole and the Son of Man on the Cross. These words were spoken by Jesus early in His ministry. Therefore, the disciples may not have made the connection with the Cross until after the Crucifixion and the Resurrection.

Just like the bronze serpent on the pole had real power to heal those bitten by snakes, the Cross has real power to heal Christians made sick by sin through the deception of the devil. The image of the Cross has this power of course because Christ was crucified on a cross.

Just like Jesus changed the nature of baptism through His own baptism (moving it from mere cleansing from sin to unification with Himself) in the Jordan River, He takes a tool of death (for crucifixion was the means of capital punishment for non-Romans at that time) and makes it the sign and image of victory over sin and death. In other words, the Cross is now a means of healing and eternal life. Also, the Cross is now the identifying symbol for being a follower of Christ.

We as Orthodox Christians do not only wear a cross around our neck, but we also make the sign of the Cross to bless ourselves. I do not need to remind you that making the sign of the Cross is also a confession of faith.

Using the right hand, with the thumb, index, and middle finger brought together we represent God the Holy Trinity (Father, Son & Holy Spirit), the two remaining fingers (ring and little finger) brought together, represent the two natures of Christ (human & divine) and are brought down against the palm to represent Christ's incarnation, descending from heaven to earth.

As we make the sign of the cross, we touch our forehead, heart, right shoulder, and left shoulder remembering the Great Commandment, "To love the Lord with all our mind, heart, soul and strength." Using the right hand and first touching the right shoulder signifies that Christ ascended to heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father. In this small gesture, our whole faith is distilled, summarised, and expressed.

Amen.