

Go Forth...

A SERVICE OF U.S. CATHOLIC MISSION ASSOCIATION

MISSIONARY COMMENTARY

LIVING INTO THE PASCHAL MYSTERY

SUNDAY READINGS:

NUMBERS 21:4-9

PSALM 78:1-2, 34-38

PHILIPPIANS 2:6-11

JOHN 3:13-17



Today's feast of the "Exaltation of the Holy Cross" is special, replacing the regular Sunday liturgy. It calls us to reflect upon a profound truth at the center of our Christian experience: *the paschal mystery*. This term succinctly expresses the total event of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection. In the paschal mystery, Christ "passed over" (*pascha*) to his Father, drawing all humanity with him, fulfilling the Father's

loving, salvific plan for all peoples. In each Eucharist, as we "proclaim the mystery of faith," we Christians remember, celebrate, and share in this paschal mystery.

Embracing a Broken World. Our experiences (wars, natural disasters, diseases, famine, crime, etc.) force us to look closely at the large scale of suffering in the contemporary world. Unfortunately, and even scandalously, examples of the lived paschal mystery and the "passion of humanity" abound. Although human misery is often reduced to cold statistics or media clips, suffering must never be depersonalized; it always has a human face! And, it is precisely in these contexts where God seems absent or hidden (*deus absconditus*) that our Christian theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*) becomes eminently realistic. Christian faith and life itself are always cruciform, signed by the cross.

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Saint John Paul II observed in *Salvifici Doloris* (SD) that the reality of suffering is ever before our eyes; suffering is that "universal theme that accompanies humanity at every point" of human existence. "The Church has to try to meet humanity in a special way on the path of its suffering" (SD 105-106). We are challenged, in imitation of Christ, to embrace our wounded world. In the words of Jon Sobrino, we are called to recognize the existence of "crucified peoples" and strive to "take them down from the cross."

Witnesses of Heroic Faith. During one severe typhoon in the Philippines where I served in mission, I heard about a mother and child who were caught by the storm surge. The mother was clinging to her badly wounded child while trying to swim to save their lives. The mother reported later that her child told her: "Mama, please let me go, because I am badly hurt; let me go so you can save your life to care for the rest of the family."

Another typhoon incident has remained with me. I remember Muelmar Magallanes, an 18-year-old construction worker. After he had moved his own family to higher ground, he went back to save some 30 others. A strong swimmer, Muelmar's last mission was to save a 6-month-old baby and mother. On his next rescue effort, he succumbed to fatigue and the strong currents. *Time* magazine named him one of the top ten heroes of 2009.

Reflection in Faith. Theologian David Bosch asserts that the Gospel affirms that "in the suffering Jesus, God embraces the suffering of the world for the sake of humanity.... Moreover, in Christ, God does not necessarily save us *from* suffering, but *in* and *through* it.... Christ suffers when we suffer. The pain people suffer is the pain of Christ himself." We are called to live into the image of Christ *on* the cross, keeping the paschal mystery at the center of our Christian lives. Yes, we "exult in the cross" with deep "resurrection faith"!

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NOTES ON THE SUNDAY READINGS:

First Reading – Numbers 21:4-9: During their desert wanderings, the Israelites were bitten by venomous snakes, “saraph serpents.” The word “saraph” probably means “the fiery one.” The bronze serpent mounted on a pole is a clear reference to Christ hanging and saving us on the cross. We need to look frequently at the crucified Christ; then, like the Israelites, we recover and are saved.

Responsorial Psalm – Psalm 78:1-2, 34-38: This psalm expresses the attitude we need throughout all of life; we must never forget the saving works of the Lord. During their life journey, the Israelites (we also) often were/are forgetful of the marvelous saving deeds of the Lord. Daily we seek to recall that God is our rock; we seek to be faithful to our baptismal covenant with God.

Second Reading – Philippians 2:6-11: Today’s second reading is from Saint Paul’s letter to the Philippians; it is often called the “Epistle of Joy.” The reading is the great hymn to Jesus Christ as Lord. This is the classic summary of the role of Jesus Christ in our salvation, especially his voluntary acceptance of the horrific death on a cross—all for love of humanity and our salvation.

Gospel – John 3:13-17: Our Gospel today from Saint John recounts the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. We hear how Jesus, the Son of Man, is lifted up on the cross; there is the obvious parallel to Moses lifting up the serpent in the desert. Jesus himself is lifted up on the cross so that we might believe and have eternal life. What further evidence do we need of God’s love for us?

Notes and Commentary by Maryknoller James H. Kroeger, who has recently published ***Walking with Pope Francis: The Official Documents in Everyday Language*** (Orbis Books) as well as ***Exploring Vatican II Treasures: Actors, Events, Insights*** and ***A Joyful Journey with Pope Francis*** (Faith Alive Books).

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