

## Exaltation of the Holy Cross, Year C

### GOSPEL

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No one has gone up to heaven except the one who came down from heaven, the Son of Man who is in heaven; and the Son of Man must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. Yes, God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life. For God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but so that through him the world might be saved.

John 3:13-17

### DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- For the first two or three centuries of Christianity, it was uncommon for Christians to have public depictions of the cross, partly for fear of persecution from Roman authorities.

Some early Christians would have a mark or tattoo on their body depicting the cross so that they could be identified as a Christian and have a Christian burial. This practice continues today.

Different Christian traditions depict the cross differently. Protestant traditions, if they use images or icons at all, depict an empty cross, emphasising Christ's victory over death. The Catholic tradition emphasises the crucifix, depicting Christ's suffering as an image of the depths of darkness the Son of God descended for our sake.

### EXPLORING THE WORD

One of the most famous conversations Jesus has with anyone in the gospels is with the Pharisee called Nicodemus. Nicodemus, a leader in his circles, is fascinated with Jesus, and yet, for fear of social reprisal, comes under the cover of night to meet with him. During their conversation, Jesus says some cryptic things, including about how 'the Son of Man must be lifted up' so that 'everyone who believes may have eternal life' (Jn 3:13-14). This is a veiled reference to his death on the cross.

As many have pointed out, this is a strange way to speak of one's own crucifixion. In the ancient world, crucifixion was not a source of life or blessing or even a symbol of love. It was a symbol of horror, of what happens when a person defies Roman authority. Yet Jesus suggests the opposite: the most terrifying image in the world will be a sacrifice of love, a gift held up for the salvation of the world.

- Explore how catechumens might be like Nicodemus in this story. Do they need to hide their fascination with

Jesus in some way? Do they need to speak in a hushed way of these things for fear of social repercussions?

- Have they ever reflected on the centrality of the crucifix in Christian worship? How strange does it seem to them?

### MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- Have those around you been open to your inquiry into Christian faith?
- In what ways can a sacrifice of love be life-giving for others? How are you called to sacrifice for the benefit of others?
- The cross is a strange mystery. How have you, or others around you, wrestled with the meaning of Christ's crucifixion?
- Make a sacrifice this week that will directly benefit or bless somebody you know. Reflect on how this might help us understand the cross more deeply.

- Use the gospel acclamation as the basis of your prayer this week, repeating throughout the day:

We adore you, O Christ, and we praise you, because by your cross you have redeemed the world.

### SHARING THE TRADITION

A closer look at the Scripture of the day, to see how it makes more explicit God's word to us through the teachings of Jesus Christ

'Yes, God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life' (Jn 3:16). It can be uncomfortable to speak of people being 'lost' and in need of saving, yet Jesus' words assume that the world is in such a situation.

- Explore this idea of salvation. You could discuss some of the catechumens' favourite movies or stories that have a salvific or heroic storyline. How do these shed light on Jesus' own salvific mission?
- The Church celebrates many different martyrs, those who have given up their life for the sake of the gospel. You could share the stories of famous martyrs (like St Maximilian Kolbe) who have given their life so that others could go free.
- Discuss the persecution of Christians in other parts of the world and what they must endure for the sake of the gospel. What does the cross mean for them?

### SYMBOLS AND IMAGES

In the Gospel reading Jesus uses the image of Moses lifting up the serpent in the desert to help us understand the cross. This story is recounted in Numbers 21:4-9, and everybody who looked upon the bronze serpent fashioned by Moses was healed of their venomous snakebite. Mysteriously, it is the symbol of their own affliction by

