

Homily – Feast of the Triumph of the Cross, Year A
St. Monica’s: September 14th, 2014

Antiphon (Galatians 6:14): “We should glory in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, for he is our salvation, our life and our resurrection; through him, we are saved and made free.”
Numbers 21:4-9: “Their patience worn out by the journey, Israel grumbles against the Lord ... whoever looked at the serpent of bronze did not die, but lived.”
Psalms 78: “Never forget the works of the Lord.”
Philippians 2:6-11: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who emptied himself, humbled himself ... becoming obedient <i>even unto death, death on a cross</i> . Therefore God highly exalted him, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.”
John 3:13-17: “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up ... for God so loved the world that he gave his only Son ... not for condemnation, but that the world might be saved through him.”

Thirteen years ago this week, the world looked on in horror and dismay as four hijacked airliners were deliberately crashed into the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York, the Pentagon in Washington D.C., and an unknown target within striking distance of a Pennsylvania farmer’s field.

Given our modern society’s obsession with escapist entertainment, you would think that we would have done anything we could to forget these tragic events, to wipe their memories clean from our individual and collective psyche. And yet, we choose to remember. Not just this tragedy, but many human tragedies. Whether it is Ground Zero, or Auschwitz or Dachau, or the killing fields of Cambodia and Rwanda, or more recently, the horrors inflicted in Syria and Iraq, in Gaza and Darfur, in Columbine and the Polytechnique, we have learned the importance of “Never forget.”

But why? Why remember such terrible events, why make pilgrimages to places so profoundly scarred by evil? Not to rub salt into old wounds, not to keep old grudges alive, not to feed an unhealthy desire for revenge and retribution. No, it is because paradoxically, these are some of the most sacred places on earth.

Why? Because they are images of human weakness and vulnerability, of our almost unimaginable capacity for evil and violence. No less, they are signs of our strength and fortitude, of our capacity to heal and to extend a healing and forgiving hand, of our pledge to break the cycle of violence and to commit anew to justice and peace. They remind us that we need to be redeemed and saved – from the suffering we endure at the hands of others, from the cruelty and hardness of our own hearts.

Today, the Church celebrates the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross: a symbol of death, transformed into a sign of victory and new life. Dating back to the early 4th century, it stands among the most ancient of liturgical feasts. Yet it has lost none of its relevance.

How did this sign – considered in Jesus’ own lifetime to be the ultimate sign of degradation, shame, and abandonment – eventually become a sign of victory and exaltation? What was the Cross, if not the cruellest and most bloody of death sentences, imposed by the Roman authorities to make an example of someone, as a public deterrent to all who dared to defy the authority and laws of the Empire? Yet paradoxically, in being willingly embraced by Jesus – in perfect obedience to the mission of self-giving, sacrificial love to which the Father had called him – this sign of defeat was transformed into an instrument of goodness and grace.

When the Cross was being carried across Canada in the weeks leading up to World Youth Day in Toronto in 2002, it was re-routed for a special visit to Ground Zero. In the midst of the rubble, the unidentified human remains, the devastation, the Cross of Christ stood as a powerful symbol indeed. At Ground Zero, the Cross gave silent yet eloquent witness to the reality that death does not have the final word: that evil will never, in the end, triumph over goodness. The Cross reminds us that God does not stand aloof, distancing himself from our human suffering. Rather, God chooses to embrace it, in solidarity with us. The lyrics of the World Youth Day “Song of the Cross” express it well:

***“Love, lifted on the Cross for me, My God, my rock, my salvation;
Love, lifted high to set me free, My God, my rock, my salvation.”***

This image of “lifting up” and “exaltation” are at the core of our Scripture readings today. They point out to us how this mysterious process which Christians call “salvation” actually works: **for all**, in the Paschal mystery of the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus; and more personally, in the hearts and lives of each of us.

1) First, the triumph of the Cross represents the triumph of Love.

For all kinds of reasons, some of us may have grown up with some pretty warped notions of the meaning of Jesus' sacrificial death – what one author perceptively called “God’s five-thousand year snit.” In this theory, a very distant God set the universe in motion, and then watched as we humans made a major mess of it all. Then, his infinite justice offended, his anger blazing, he demanded satisfaction – preferably in the form of blood. So Jesus volunteered to come and pay the price. (In *really* warped versions of this theory, the Father and Son became effectively “the divine sadist and the divine masochist”.)

Today’s Gospel says nothing about anger, or even justice. What it does tell us is that ***“God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, so that all who believe in Him might have eternal life.”*** God’s desire is *not* condemnation, but that the world might experience salvation – flourishing – new life. But what would it take for us to figure this out? Prophets came and went – world events unfolded – God remained faithful to his covenant – and yet we still did not seem to be getting the message.

2) Second: the Cross reveals that love implies self-gift, self-sacrifice

So what happened? St. Paul gives us an insight into this mystery, in that wonderful hymn found in his letter to the Philippians. God looked down on us and saw a world brimming with sorrow, filled with anguish, in need of new hope. Willingly, in full knowledge of the consequences, the Son’s heart was so moved by compassion that he chose to forego his safety, his claim to equality with the Father.

The Word became flesh. In Jesus, he emptied himself, humbled himself, was born as one of us – in poverty and obscurity. He fully embraced the human condition – its joys and sorrows, its triumphs and fears, its pleasures and pains – in all things except sin. Jesus embodied perfect obedience to the Father’s will, to his mission of proclaiming God’s kingdom of justice and peace, to extending God’s unconditional love and mercy to all he met – even when the response was misunderstanding, hostility, rejection, and violence. And thus, he became obedient “even unto death, death on a Cross.”

Then, we are told, God **“highly exalted him”**. “Lifted up” on the Cross, Jesus lifts each of us up to God. In those outstretched arms, he shows us that God literally loves us “this much”. Because “God so loved the world that He gave his only Son”: this means that for Jesus, even being tortured

and lifted up on a cross, and thereby becoming the embodiment of our healing, was not too high a price to pay. This message of the Cross, St. Paul tells us, was a “stumbling-block to the Jews,” and “folly to the Greeks”: a sign of contradiction, impossible to accept. There would seem to be only two possibilities: that God is just crazy, or rather, that God is just crazy in love ... with us. And those who love know that these two states are not necessarily mutually exclusive!

What about us? Jesus makes this quite clear: if we are to be his followers, if we are to be glorified as he was – then we too must be willing to have this love for one another. “There is no greater love than this,” says the Lord, “than you lay down your life for your friend.”

3) How do we, in our frail and sinful humanity, grow into this love?

By now, you may be thinking, “how am I supposed to do this?” I can barely cope with my family – my work – my studies – my struggles in relationship – my attempt to set some time aside for God, in my busy life – and I am supposed to lay down my life? Maybe I’m just not quite there yet. Maybe, like the Israelites in the first reading today, I grumble, complain, maybe even whine a little, find it hard to be grateful for what I have. My Cross feels heavy enough – am I to go looking for another?

Again, our first reading contains a pearl of wisdom. We are told that tired of their bellyaching, God “sent” poisonous serpents among the people – presumably to punish them. Now, parents, when your children whine, you may be upset or disappointed, but I doubt you would send poisonous snakes into the room to punish them and make your point! In any event, as we ourselves so often do, they attributed this poison to God.

Think, though: maybe the people were just poisoned by their own bitterness, insecurity, and ingratitude. They had lost sight of the wonders God had been performing in their sight as He brought them out from the land of bondage and slavery. By this point, God may well have been tempted to ask, “what part of ‘I love you!’ don’t you understand?” But when the people cried out, God heard their cry yet again. They needed healing, and God sent them a means of being healed.

4) The Solution: Eyeballing the Serpent. Facing your demons.

To be healed of our suffering, we need to be able to confront it, to look straight at it without flinching. If you confront your demon, if you expose it to the light, you can be healed of it. If not – like a snake in the

grass, it will strike you where you are most vulnerable. God tells us: recognize what you are up against. Look it straight in the eye – and perhaps it will lose its power over you. You will know then that it is the serpent that is striking at your heel – and not God. And that if it is venomous, it is not of God.

Those who are willing to face their demons, with the grace of God, will usually overcome them. But those who prefer to keep them in the shadows will fall prey to them. And don't fool yourself – all of us are vulnerable. We all have our areas of weakness, our Achilles' heel, our "thorns in the flesh" that can trip us up – no matter how physically strong, intellectually sharp, psychologically astute, or spiritually mature we may think ourselves to be.

Jesus shows us the pattern. His "lifting up" is inseparable from his "self-emptying." What the Father is "exalting" in Jesus is not his strengths, his miracles, his power – but rather, his humble, self-emptying, self-giving love, his choosing to divest himself from power out of love. That is what is "lifted up" before us as an example, as a model. That is what is presented to us as the only possible solution to the violence and intrigues and envy that befall us – in the Church and in the world.

We are surrounded by crosses. Crosses around our necks, on our walls, in our churches. We make the sign of the Cross when we begin and end a prayer, when we enter and leave a Church. But today, let us be conscious of the deeper meaning of the Cross. Let us remember that the Cross reveals not only the great evil that exists in our world, but also the eternal response to that evil by our good and loving God. However much we humans continue to destroy and scatter and knock down, God so loves us that his response is to give life, and gather us together, and lift us up to glory. May we know in our hearts and live out in our lives the words spoken in our Entrance Antiphon:

"We should glory in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, for he is our salvation, our life, and our resurrection; through him, we are saved and made free."

"Lord, enfold me in the depths of your heart, and there hold me, refine, purge, and set me on fire, raise me aloft, until my own self knows utter annihilation."

"In the shadow of death, may we not look back to the past, but seek in utter darkness the dawn of God." (Teilhard de Chardin)