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September 14: Exaltation of the Holy Cross

Gospel for September 14th,
feast of the Exaltation of the
Holy Cross, and commentary.

Gospel (*Jn 3:13-17*)

No one has ascended into heaven but he who descended from heaven, the Son of man. And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever

believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

Commentary

The Gospel for the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross includes part of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, a prominent figure in Jerusalem who comes to Him at night. Although he is a "teacher in Israel" (*Jn* 3:10), Nicodemus approaches our Lord with deference, attracted by his imposing figure and preaching, filled with authority and wisdom. Jesus' profound words require on our part an attitude of attentive and humble listening, like we see in Nicodemus.

This passage makes many references to the binomial up/down, and the actions of going up and down, with rich theological content. “Above” is the realm of the divine, heaven, where the Father is and from where the Son has come. The Son of God has deigned to descend to the created world to become one of us; and from here, from below, he returns triumphantly to the Father, with our glorified humanity, as the Risen Jesus himself will say at the end of the Gospel: “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God” (*Jn* 20:17). Thanks to Jesus’ redemptive work, eternal life and salvation have been opened to us.

This mystery takes place because Jesus allows himself to be lifted up on the Cross, to paradoxically transform into exaltation the terrible and humiliating gesture of lifting up the crucified so that they could be seen by all the people. The

culmination of his failure in the eyes of the world becomes a figure of his triumph in the eyes of the Father, and therefore the source of salvation for mankind. Thus we see how much God loved the world (v. 16).

To explain this to Nicodemus in a few words, Jesus refers to the famous passage about the bronze serpent in the book of Numbers 21:8-9. There God commands Moses to forge a bronze serpent and place it on a pole to be raised up in the desert in the sight of all the people. And just as the Israelites bitten by snakes paradoxically obtained salvation and healing by looking at an uplifted serpent, so men immersed in sin can achieve salvation by looking at the One who is lifted up on a Cross as though he himself were cursed and a sinner.

Pope Francis, when reflecting on the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy

Cross that we commemorate today, said with reference to this passage from Jesus' dialogue with Nicodemus: "Some non-Christian person might ask: why 'exalt' the Cross? We can respond that we do not exalt *any* cross whatsoever or *all* crosses: we exalt *the Cross of Jesus*, because in it God's love for humanity was fully revealed. That's what the Gospel of John reminds us of in today's liturgy: 'God so loved the world that He gave his only Son' (3:16). The Father 'gave' the Son to save us, and this resulted in the death of Jesus, and his death on the Cross."^[1]

And the Holy Father continued: "Why? Why was the Cross necessary? Because of the gravity of the evil which enslaved us. The Cross of Jesus expresses both things: all the negative forces of evil, and all of the gentle omnipotence of God's mercy. The Cross would seem to decree

Christ's failure, but in reality it signals His victory. On Calvary, those who mocked him said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross' (cf. *Mt* 27:40). But the opposite was true: it was precisely because Jesus was the Son of God, that He was there, on the Cross, faithful to the end to the loving plan of the Father. And for this very reason God 'exalted' Jesus (*Phil* 2:9), conferring universal kingship on Him."^[2]

^[1] Pope Francis, *Angelus*, September 14, 2014.

^[2] Ibid.

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