

14 September – The Triumph of the Cross A – B – C

First reading Numbers 21:4-9

On the way the people lost patience. They spoke against God and against Moses, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt to die in this wilderness? For there is neither bread nor water here: we are sick of this unsatisfying food." At this God sent fiery serpents among the people: their bite brought death to many in Israel. The people came and said to Moses, "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you. Intercede for us with the Lord to save us from these serpents." Moses interceded for the people, and the Lord answered him, "Make a fiery serpent and put it on a standard. If anyone is bitten and looks at it, he shall live." So Moses fashioned a bronze serpent which he put on a standard, and if anyone was bitten by a serpent, he looked at the bronze serpent and lived.

Second reading Philippians 2:6-11

The state of Jesus Christ was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave, and became as men are; and being as all men are, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross. But God raised him high and gave him the name which is above all other names so that all beings in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld, should bend the knee at the name of Jesus and that every tongue should acclaim Jesus Christ as Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Gospel John 3:13-17

Jesus said to Nicodemus: "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."

Meditation

On September 13, 335, Constantine's Basilica of the Resurrection was dedicated in Jerusalem.

The annual celebration of that event was followed the next day by a solemn veneration of the relic of the Holy Cross preserved in the basilica. This gave rise to a major feast of the Eastern Church, the Exaltation of the Cross. The feast was introduced at Rome in the seventh century.

The cross triumphant, both an icon of the Crucified and symbol of his exaltation, reminds us first of all that it is by being executed as a criminal that Christ won his victory. It also proclaims that we must carry our cross and die with him. Thus we will live with the One who, lifted above the earth, draws all people to himself. Jesus could have died in any number of ways, but he was nailed to the tree of the cross as if symbolism itself demanded it. Modern psychology has relearned what the ancients knew – that the tree is a symbol deeply rooted in the human psyche. We know ourselves to be planted like a tree in the history of generations. It is the same with the cross. From the time of pagan antiquity it has had a cosmic significance. It evokes the whole universe with its four dimensions, its four cardinal points, its four elements. Christ's death breathed new significance into this symbol. The totality of the redemptive mystery, the work of the Word present to all creation, was made manifest through the wood of the cross. In stretching out his arms, Jesus gathered Jews and Gentiles into a single people, expressing the width, the length, the height and the depth of his love which surpasses all knowledge.

The history of salvation is played out between two trees – the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life planted in the middle of the garden. If we want to eat of the fruit of life, we must be converted to the wisdom of God and make no other claim to glory than the cross of Christ.