



SUNDAY BEFORE HOLY CROSS SEPTEMBER 11

THE GOSPEL READING

John 3:13-17

[Life in the Kingdom]

The Lord said, "No one has ascended into heaven but he who descended from heaven, the Son of man who is in heaven. 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."

THE SERMON

While the people of Israel travel in the wilderness, they face many challenges shortly after their slavery in Egypt. This includes the long journey, the desert, the lack of water, food, and the temptation not to trust the Lord when they could not see their destination — the Promised Land. As they struggle with their faith, they become discouraged on the way. In their frustration, they complain to Moses about their challenges in the wilderness. Then, serpents come into their camp and start biting them, so they ask Moses to pray for them.

Moses prays for the people, and the Lord says to Moses, "Make a serpent for yourself and put it on a signal pole; and it shall be if a serpent should bite someone, when the



one bitten looks at it, he shall live.” Then Moses makes a copper serpent and puts it on a signal pole, so if a venomous serpent bites anyone, they look at the copper serpent after being bitten, and they would live (Numbers 21:5-9).

This is the background of Jesus’ words when He says, “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.” The symbolic beauty points to the reality of God’s love for us and the redemptive work of His Son. In the Old Testament, the serpent symbolizes sin and the spiritual enemy of our souls. When the people stop trusting God, and begin to be bitter and complain, they drift away from God, and that’s when the serpents bite them. This is what happens with sin. When we direct ourselves away from the love of God instead of towards it, we become vulnerable to sin, which, in a sense, bites us and infuses venom into our hearts.

God, however, in His great love for us, has not left us to die in the wilderness, bitten by serpents, even when we turn away from Him. His love is endless, and He never gives up on His people. In the Old Testament story, Moses prays to God and asks for His help. Moses is a type of Christ; that is, he points to Christ and His ministry, which the Son of God fulfills in a more extraordinary way than Moses. Just as Moses prayed for his people in the Sinai Desert, so Christ continually mediates for us to our Father (Romans 8:34, Hebrews 7:35).

Just as Moses lifts up the serpent in the wilderness, the Son of Man is lifted up, so whoever believes in Him may have eternal life. The Lord Jesus refers to His Crucifixion here. When the people of God in the wilderness look at the bronze serpent, they are healed and restored to life. Jesus fulfills this because even though He is perfect and without sin, He took on all our failures and nailed them on the Cross as He was crucified. In that sense, He died for us, and on the Cross, He destroys death by death. He can do so because He is the Son of God, and because He rose on the third day to restore us to His eternal life.

God so loved the world that He gave us His only begotten Son. The word “world” has different meanings in Scripture and tradition. It can mean the natural world, the entire cosmos — the heavens, the earth, the seas, and all that is in them, which God the Father created through the Son of God. It can also mean the world that has turned away from God, that is, worldly things (such as pride and selfish desires). What will it profit a person if they gain the whole world, and lose their own soul (Mark 8:36)?

In this passage, however, God loves everything He created and all human beings, regardless of who they are. This is why the Father sent His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. This is why the Lord became incarnate (that is, he took human nature and united it to His divine nature), and this is why He lived, died on the Cross, and rose again. It is because He gave Himself for our weaknesses so He could heal and deliver us from death by giving us eternal life.

As Jesus rose from the dead, He also grants eternal life to all who believe in Him. As Saint Augustine of Hippo says, "As then formerly he who looked to the serpent that was lifted up, was healed of its poison, and saved from death; so now he who is conformed to the likeness of Christ's death by faith and the grace of baptism, is delivered both from sin by justification, and from death by the resurrection: as He Himself said; That whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

This has a profound meaning for each one of us individually. The Lord loves the world and loves every single person in the world with infinite love. And with perfect love. He knows us by name, and He knows our hearts. He knows our struggles and even our failures. And yet, He has loved each of us and given Himself for us so we can have eternal life.

If we open our hearts to that love of God, who loves us infinitely to the point of giving us His own Son, and if we open our hearts to the Son, who voluntarily gives Himself, we cannot but be filled with love for God. As Saint Porphyrios says, "What is higher than the highest? Love for Christ is something else. It is without end, without satiety. It gives life; it gives strength; it gives health; it gives, gives, and gives. And the more it gives, the more the person wishes to fall in love."

When we look at the Cross, and have faith in Him, who died for us and rose from the dead, we are healed from the effects of sin. We are delivered from death, and we are healed. God creates all things perfect and beautiful, yet we have often turned away from Him and wandered into the wilderness. As serpents, the sufferings and struggles of this world bite us. And yet, Christ has conquered all, and He has given Himself for us so we can have eternal life. As we behold the Cross, we are healed. As we behold His Resurrection with faith, we are raised to eternal life.