

The Exaltation of the Holy Cross
(Numbers 21:4-9 / John 3:13-17)
14.09.2019

In St John's gospel Jesus speaks of the *Son of Man* being *lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent of bronze in the desert*. This statement refers to Christ's exaltation upon the cross which is the mystery we celebrate today. Mention of the serpent has us think not only of the image fashioned in bronze and raised upon a standard in the Book of Numbers for the healing of the people who were afflicted by poisonous bites. It also has us think of the initial serpent encountered in Scripture, in the story of the Fall. In Genesis 3 the serpent first appears as a destructive force. This reptile's devastating power lay in its having promulgated lies and introduced the notion of deception with a false representation of God's intentions in regard to humanity. You will recall how the serpent perverted God's word by the explanation it proffered in regard to *the tree of life* which had been planted in the middle of the garden. The serpent cast doubt upon God's goodness. Its lie was accepted as the truth. From thence forth the relationship between humanity and God and between humans themselves has been damaged.

Talk about Jesus' *elevation upon the cross* being for the healing of the people has us think of the ignominious tree in a whole new light.

We know how the cross was considered to be an accursed plant, a tree of shame. The Scriptures themselves say: *Cursed is the one who hangs upon the tree*.

By what Christ lived lifted up upon the cross – revealing there, as He did, the gracious love of God – this ill-fated tree underwent an extraordinary transformation. It became nothing other than the source of God's blessing and healing grace. It became a tree of the sort that is spoken of in chapter 22 of the Book of the Apocalypse: a tree which is seen to produce fruit which has an extraordinary medicinal effect *for the healing of the nations*.

You will surely recall John's insistence in his Passion Narrative upon the fact that *blood and water flowed* from the open heart of Jesus, when His side was pierced with a lance as hung upon the cross. In this way the evangelist presents what happened on Calvary's Hill as nothing less than the coming to birth of the Church. More than that, the flowing of blood and water from Christ's side as He hung upon the cross is the sign of the whole of humanity's renaissance to new life by what Christ lived for us there. It is as if a resurrection already takes place on Calvary's Hill. A new dawn rises for the whole human race as Christ enters into the darkness of death.

It is so important for us to hold ourselves in the tide of blood and water that flowed from Christ's side; so important that we allow ourselves to be immersed by God's merciful love; so important that we bathe in the waters of life of which He is the source. Washed therein we are led to experience true well-being, the healing and peace for which we long, at the deepest level of our hearts.

Let's face it – and that is precisely what Jesus' words in John's gospel invite us to do when they bid us to *look to the Son of Man lifted up...* to face up to this fact – we are all of us wounded beings. Every one of us, without exception, is a person who suffers from brokenness in our life. Our relationship with God is a fractured one. Likewise our relationship with ourselves is frayed. Moreover, our relationships with others are far from perfect. The whole of our relational life is marred and tainted by sin.

Just as our first parents stood at the foot of the tree in the Garden of Eden feeling vulnerable and exposed, aware of their guilt and, as a result, deeply ashamed of themselves, so, in our weakened state, we are inclined to react as they did. We quickly shy away from, and do not want to accept, responsibility for the malaise we feel in our lives. We readily blame others – often those closest to us – for our pain. There is even a temptation for us to turn things around to the point of pinning the blame for all the bad things that befall us on the good God.

How prompt we are to make excuses for ourselves rather than admit to the truth. We don't like to do as we heard Jesus tell us we should: that is, face up to our own brokenness while looking to Him in His wounded state.

Remember, to quote the words of the apostle Peter: *It was our wounds which He bore upon the tree.* This implies that to really look to Jesus, lifted up before our eyes, is to see ourselves for the wounded beings we are: suffering men and women who are called to healing.

We should never forget that ultimately with the call addressed to us to contemplate Jesus glorified upon the cross comes the invitation to see our own lives restored in the light of His glory.

More than our looking at Jesus what really counts is that we come to think of Him as One who looks upon us from the vantage point of the cross.

Jesus looks down upon us from the place where He hangs crucified out of love for all humanity. The regard Christ poses upon us from the height of the cross is not one of stark condemnation, but of gentle compassion. If only we would allow ourselves to recognise the love that shines forth from His eyes as He considers us kindly! Jesus does not scrutinise us with a disparaging look, rather He gazes upon us with a gracious benevolence. As He looks upon us it is as if He speaks to us, quietly whispering into the ear of our hearts the deepest desire of His heart which is that we come to trust in His mercy and be ready to welcome the peace He offers to us through forgiveness.

More than just looking at us, Jesus reaches down to us from the cross. He wants to hold us in His embrace. Christ's desire for us is that as we allow Him to hold us in His arms so that we may experience the security and serenity He offers us. What the Saviour wants us to be assured of is God's forgiving love which is revealed to us by the cross' reconciling power.

The fruit of Christ's Sacred Passion is nothing other than a medicine of healing grace which is given to restore our shattered lives.

While our brokenness tends to weigh us down and make us feel desolate, the unspoken invitation Jesus addressed to us from the cross invites us to allow ourselves to be lifted up as we look to Him elevated high. Christ would not have us despair. He seeks to encourage us. His deepest desire is to see us raised to new life with and in Him.

Jesus longs that we dare to hope in God's merciful love which He has for mission to reveal to us.

To contemplate Christ's Sacred Passion is not only to recognise the deep suffering He endured upon the cross, but to see what He underwent there for what it was and still is: the mighty revelation of the depth of God's passionate love for each one of us. What depth of feeling was in Christ's heart as He hung upon the tree, with His arms outstretched, wide open, signifying His wide-embracing, all-encompassing, love!

What Jesus wants us to appreciate as we look to Him is that what we are offered on Calvary's Hill is nothing other than the fulfilment of God's ultimate plan for the whole world, beginning with each one of us: and that is life and peace, *Vita et Pax!*

The message of this day is that no matter how dark things may appear to us at certain moments in our lives, there is hope for us; no matter how terrible the problems facing us may be, an issue is always offered to us; no matter many our defects and how grave our sins, forgiveness and healing grace are available to us; no matter how intense the difficulties and challenges that befall us, we can and will endure and come through – with the help of God's grace;

Our hope is the cross of Christ. The Sacred Liturgy proclaims this forcibly. An ancient hymn of the Church's Liturgy hails the cross as *Spes Unica, our unique hope*. It has us sing: *Hail the cross our only hope*. We are bidden today to be bold enough to believe in those words for ourselves and then to proclaim their truth before others.

The call addressed to us to *behold the cross* is an invitation to look to Jesus *lifted up* with the hope of healing in our hearts. In the words of Pope Francis, it befalls us to recall: *The cross of Christ reveals the power of God to bridge every division, heal every wound, re-establish the original bonds of brotherly love*.

It is important for us as a community to recall on this patronal feast of our Abbey, that St Bernard Tolomei, founder of our particular Congregation within the Benedictine Order, realised and placed great emphasis upon the centrality of the passion of Jesus Christ.

Saint Bernard Tolomei regarded contemplation and imitation of Christ's passion as indispensable for the living of an authentic spiritual life. The saintly founder of Monte Oliveto and his companions heard and took to heart Jesus' words about *taking upon the cross to follow Him*. Quite literally, Bernard brought with him into the solitude of Accona, where he established the Archabbey of Monte Oliveto Maggiore, a family heirloom, an ancient cross which is still venerated in our Mother-House. Before this cross he would spend long hours in prayer.

In his *Abridged Life of Bernard Tolomei*, Dom Bernard M. Marechaux writes: *Bernard kept a great crucifix of most striking appearance as an heirloom from his wealthy family, which is still venerated in a chapel of the church at Monte Oliveto. This crucifix is celebrated on account of its close association with the ecstasies of the abbot, who, when kneeling at its foot, was sometimes raised into the air on a level with it, covering it with kisses, so that soon it was no longer a cold, silent effigy; it was the Saviour Himself who consoled him, who spoke to him, who revealed His wondrous secrets to him through its medium*.

Leaving aside the hagiographical style of the author, let us retain as an invitation addressed to us today the call to allow ourselves to be consoled by the cross of Christ; to allow Jesus to speak to us from the cross, revealing to us *wondrous secrets through its medium*.

One thing Dom Marechaux tells us that was revealed to Bernard Tolomei is that *the Tree of the cross which he was called to plant by his monastic foundation would flourish and bear throughout the world leaves that would never fade... olive branches of peace, medicinal leaves for the healing of the nations*.

Today, on our patronal feast, we recall that Monte Oliveto Maggiore is the cradle of our own foundation here in Northern Ireland. We received the blessing of our mission at the foot of that cross venerated at Monte Oliveto Maggiore. This greatly inspired us in the choice of the

patronage of our community. We were sent to plant a shoot of that tree here in the fertile soil of this hallowed valley of Kilbroney. May the tree of life take root in this place beside the flowing streams where it is planted, so that it may, by the help of God's grace, bear much fruit and abundant leaves of healing and peace.

Last March, at Monte Oliveto Maggiore, in the context of the joint Abbatial Blessing of the Abbots of the Abbey of St Bernard Tolomei (S. Korea) and our own Abbey of the Holy Cross, our Abbot General alluded to the significance of bringing together the figures of St Bernard Tolomei and the Holy Cross. This fact led me to think of a prayer composed by Dom Bernard M. Marechaux which is found in his *Abridged Life* of our founder. I would like to conclude this morning's reflection by sharing that prayer with you.

Oh, saintly Bernard... passionate lover of Jesus Crucified, your spirit is the divine sap flowing through this tree of Olivet, which produces so many great religious, our fathers and our models. Oh, may this life-giving sap never be exhausted, nor lose its vigour. Oh, may it flow in the mystic olive tree which our blessed hands have planted, may that olive tree bud and bring forth much fruit in its saints, and may that holy oil, which shall strengthen, also make glad the whole Church of God.

We pray for the *whole Church of God* is this Abbey, looking to the Holy Cross which we profess to be *our reconciliation and our peace*: the source of Christian unity, the rallying point for all who believe in Christ who gave His life *so that all may be one*.

That is the message of the icon of the Holy Cross which is venerated in this abbey church where we are called to live our lives as Christ lived His death: *for the gathering together of all God's scattered children. May all be one!*