

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.

You will have seen that today is Holy Cross Day. You might, like me, have wondered what it is all about. In the church year, there are several celebrations which honour and celebrate the cross used in the crucifixion. Unlike Good Friday, which is dedicated to the passion of Christ and the crucifixion, these other feast days celebrate the Cross itself, as the sign of salvation. Hence our gospel reading today which exalts in the cross because we are saved through that cross of Jesus.

The feast of the Holy Cross, commemorated on September 14th, recalls three events:

1. The finding of the True Cross - under Emperor Constantine, around AD 327, Bishop Macarius of Jerusalem ordered excavations to be made to find the location of Calvary and also of the Holy Sepulchre or tomb. During these excavations wood from of the cross was recovered. Macarius deemed them to be authentic (the crosses of the two thieves were also recovered). By tradition, it was also Saint Helena who discovered the cross with Constantine.
2. Following the discovery of the cross, Constantine built a Basilica on the site of the Holy Sepulchre. On 13 September, 335, it was consecrated in Jerusalem, along with the consecration of Calvary. The day after the church's consecration, the relic of the cross was shown ("exalted") the first time to the people for veneration.
3. Later, the feast was also associated with the recovery of the Holy Cross by Emperor Heraclius on 13 September 628, after it had earlier fallen into the hands of the Persians.

On this Holy Cross Day, our gospel reading is from John. And it's a very well known reading. It contains the verse:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

Because of the reading's familiarity, we are tempted to focus only on this verse. Martin Luther referred to it as "the heart of the Bible, the Gospel in miniature." Its words are a delight for saints and solace for sinners.

But this whole reading is also the most misinterpreted and often taken out of context.

So what is the context?

Jesus is talking to Nicodemus, a Pharisee and leader of the temple. He comes to Jesus by night, wanting to know more about the Good News of the kingdom that Jesus brings. He acknowledges that Jesus is a teacher who comes from God, because he believes that no one else could do the miracles, or 'signs' as John's gospel says. Jesus replies saying, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Then comes that interesting interchange with Nicodemus who questions how anyone can be born again from the mother's womb. Jesus replies explaining that no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. Jesus becomes irritated that Nicodemus, a Jewish rabbi, cannot understand these requirements. But Nicodemus will understand eventually, and later he defends Jesus before the council.

Jesus is continuing this conversation with Nicodemus in today's gospel reading.

Jesus first explains that it is only the Son of Man, i.e. Jesus himself, who can ascend into heaven, and that is because he first descended from heaven, from God his father. And the Son of Man, Jesus, ascends into heaven, or as he says, is “lifted up,” just like the serpent in the wilderness was lifted up, so that whoever believes in Him can have eternal life.

These verses answer Nicodemus’ question, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?” (v. 4). Both the “lifted up” serpent and the “lifted up” Jesus confer new life on those who look upon or believe in them.

The words, “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness” (v. 14), refer to the story from Numbers 21:4-9, and every Jewish child would know it. The Israelites sinned by grumbling against God for bringing them out of Egypt into the wilderness. God punished them with a plague of fiery serpents, killing many Israelites. The Israelites confessed their sin and begged for mercy, so God told Moses to make a bronze serpent and hold it up high, on a pole. Whoever looked up at the bronze serpent was saved from the fiery serpents—given new life—born anew. Nicodemus might have been expected to link this story to Jesus’ words about being born again—from above.

That’s the context of the gospel.

The misinterpreted part refers to verse 16, ¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” Let’s look at ‘so loved the world.’

Other Bible translations give different wordings:

In the Message Bible, the word ‘so’ means the extent or amount of God’s love for the world. It says,

*“This is **how much** God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son.”*

In the New Living Translation, the word ‘so’ means the manner or way that God loved the world. It says,

*“For this is **how** God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son.”*

So is it the amount of love, or the way God loved the world? Greek scholars say the second way. It should be translated “For in this manner, (or “in this way”) God loved the world.”

Why does it matter how we understand this verse? It makes a big difference. If we read “God loved the world **so much**,” our focus is immediately put on us. It makes the Father’s motivation for sacrificing his Son, the amount of his love for humanity, as if he simply could not do without us, and would do anything to get us back.

So despite all the misunderstandings in this gospel reading today, we must ultimately focus on the Good News that Jesus announces here. The message is that God sent the Son into the world so that the world might be saved through him. And that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. God’s motive is love and God’s objective is salvation.

It’s God’s promise, that we are saved through him. It’s our hope when times are tough, and the world seems so unpredictable.

Let us hang on to God’s promise.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN