

# EXALTATION OF THE CROSS

September 14, 2008

QUEEN OF PEACE CATHOLIC COMMUNITY  
GAINESVILLE, FLORIDA  
Rev. Jeff McGowan

## 1<sup>ST</sup> READING: NUMBERS 21:4B-9

Moses accordingly made a bronze serpent and mounted it on a pole, and whenever anyone who had been bitten by a serpent looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.

## PSALM 78

Do not forget the works of the Lord!

## 2<sup>ND</sup> READING: PHILIPPIANS 2:6-11

Brothers and sisters: Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped.

## GOSPEL: JOHN 3:13-17

For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

+++++

God wanted Moses to cure the people by lifting up the bronze snake for them to see. God wanted it to be clear that the healing didn't come naturally, it didn't come through Moses, it was a direct intervention of God. That is what ties the image to the cross. Our salvation doesn't come naturally, our salvation doesn't come through Pharisee or Rabbi, Church or priest, our salvation is the direct intervention of God. Jesus on that cross is the ultimate healing. The cross was an effective "mechanism of social control." Crucifixion was so horrendous, such a terrible torture, so painful and at the same time totally humiliating that it put the fear of the Romans in every human being. The cross is the antidote for human fear of more powerful humans.

And the cross is at the center of the Good Shepherd's life. It is not an act of violence that takes Jesus by surprise and attacks him from the outside doing him in but a free gift of his very life. Jesus anticipates what is coming and robs the Romans of their power by saying: "I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. (Jn10:7f)" The Good Shepherd transforms the violence of the act of crucifixion into an act of freely giving his life for others. And in this he interprets for us what happens at the institution of the Eucharist: Jesus does not give *some-thing*, but rather gives himself. And that is how he gives life.

We venerate the cross with a kiss every year on Good Friday. As I watch our parishioners file slowly toward the cross that those who will enter the Catholic Church at the Easter vigil hold, I find myself moved almost to tears at this magnificent mystery. One by one, old and young, healthy and ill, wealthy and struggling, we reverently kiss this ancient symbol of pain. We see the man in the wheel chair and the blind woman being helped by a younger parishioner; their crosses are obvious. Because I've been here awhile, I see the elderly couple who have exhausted their retirement savings to bail out and rehab their beloved child, again and again. I see the wonderful man and the wonderful woman who are in the process of divorcing each other. I see the child longing for the love of an alcoholic parent; I see the family torn apart by the war. It goes on. The human condition leads us to the cross.

As we tenderly press our lips in so intimate a gesture, could we meet, greet and welcome all the destructive elements in our own lives? I bring my sins to this cross.

*[Teen Mass: I'd like to invite our teens to bring signs naming sins to the cross.: stealing, lying, drunkenness, etc.]*

I remember Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss. Lord, I want to be your friend and stand by you. I weep inwardly for the world of pain and as our nails are hammered into the cross, I find myself praying as I do on no other night. Please transform my sins into virtues so I can live in freedom.

*[Teen Mass: I invite the teens to cover the sins with signs of virtues: respect, kindness, generosity, stewardship, etc.]*

*[At Tenn Mass I skipped this]* [This past Good Friday, I received a special response to my prayers. I watched as a young mother and dad approached their turn. Mom knelt with her youngster in her arms and kissed the cross and then she lifted her child so that her tiny mouth would meet the wood of the cross. My heart contracted, I think I saw in an instant, the future of this little one. Her parents, who were kneeling together with their little girl, were preparing her for that great love that conquers fear and brings resurrection even through our most painful experiences and daunting challenges.]

[At 10:00 Mass Baptisms: Parents as you present your children for Baptism today, you will be promising to bring them up in our faith. The Catholic Faith is not all about catechism and church laws. It is about God's intervention in our lives celebrated in Mass, and in our special rituals throughout the year. These are not thoughtless events; they enter into the fiber of our lives so that we are always aware that God intervenes in our lives, transforms even our most horrid challenges and our sins and assures us of his love for us, love that will not fail. Your children will not be immune from human struggles, but you can give them confidence to live with hope through faith and love.]

Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit priest and renowned anthropologist, said that if we could but gather together, in one instant, all the suffering of our lives, the explosion of love would transform the whole world. The cross unites all our suffering to transform the world. That's Good News!