

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” EXALTATION OF THE CROSS (B)  
Numbers 21:4b-9 Psalm 78 Philippians 2: 6-11 John 3: 13-17  
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

I suspect people are going to wonder what this feast of the Lord is all about and how it happens to show up on a Sunday. It is rare that most people get to celebrate this feast each year. They may also wonder, “What’s all this talk of the Cross, it's not Lent?” For us Dominicans and, I am sure for other religious orders, this feast marked the beginning of a season of fasting and more rigorous observances that lasted till Easter. The feast had its roots in the emperor Constantine's vision of a cross. The experience led to his conversion and the acceptance of Christianity by the Roman empire. A persecuted religion became the state religion and history shows what a mixed blessing that was!

We Christians have gotten used to the sight of the cross in our churches. Maybe we miss the irony of this feast; we are "exalting" a vicious instrument of execution. The Romans inherited the cross from the Persians and used it extensively. It was such an ignominious form of execution that Roman citizens were not put to death on a cross. Crucifixion was used only on slaves and those who committed treason and brutal crimes. The victims were stripped naked, and their clothing given as a bonus to the soldiers. A placard, announcing the person's name and crime, was carried by the criminal to the point of execution and then nailed over the head. (Jesus' placard, we are told, just read "King of the Jews"—Pilate's ironic touch.) Death was agonizingly slow, usually resulting from hunger and thirst.

While each Sunday's scriptures have a significance about them, nevertheless, today's Pauline reading is often quoted and, one might say, "famous." So, I thought we would focus on it for these reflections.

Paul speaks often of the cross in his letters. He says that his only boast is in the cross of Jesus. He frequently reminds us that there is no work we do that earns us redemption. Rather, through the cross, God has done the work of uniting Jews and Gentiles. He preached that God had nailed our sins and their resulting guilt to the cross; when Jesus died on the cross, so did our guilt. The mystery Paul preached is that it was the very instrument that put Jesus to death that was also the means of our new life. What we could not do, God did. Paul would conclude that we have

reason to exalt because the power of sin and death are conquered through the cross.

That was Paul's attraction to the cross. I remember others who were also attracted to it. During the years I visited San Quentin prison I noted the popularity of crosses among the inmates. We used to give plastic crosses on black string to those inmates who requested them. I know some took the crosses and merely wore them as jewelry—not unlike the popularity of gold and gaudy crosses worn by athletes, super models, movie stars and others who consider the cross a "fashion statement." But it was clear to me that there were other inmates who cherished the crosses. They hung them from pegs in their cells or wore them discretely under prison-issued blue denim shirts. Did these inmates see in the cross the symbol of God's presence in their pain and humiliation? Did they see the cross as a reminder that all is forgiven, no matter what they had done? Did they identify with Jesus and see him as a person, like themselves, lost in a big and impersonal system of retaliation and punishment? As offenders locked up and often forgotten, even by their own families, did the inmates see an understanding friend in the outcast and crucified One? I can't say for sure. But I think today some of them would have reason with us to exalt in the cross.

Philippians focuses our attention on God's work on our behalf. And contrary to the allure successful ventures, daring exploits and glamor have for our world, God's "accomplishment" was to take on our human condition, suffer ignominy and finally death for us. As Paul might say, "What a sign of contradiction the cross is!" Praise for this astounding act by God not only comes to our mouths, Paul says today, but is proclaimed in all the cosmos— "in heaven and on the earth and under the earth".

The Philippians hymn begins with a great descent. The pre-existing One of the same "form" as God, let go of the privileges and dignity of the Godhead and became human. Notice the intentionality in Paul's statement: this was a willed self-emptying. But it just didn't involve a brief visit, a tourist's stopping -off on earth. Rather, the self-emptying continued through all of Christ's life, ending with the total gift of himself on the cross. Paul is also telling us that Jesus wasn't coerced into this decision; he took it on freely and accepted the full consequences of his becoming human and being faithful to God--- he accepted the cross.

Now the hymn turns upward in direction: "Because of this..." The ascent and return to God began from the cross. Reflect on what we do at eucharist today. We

pour out wine, made from crushed grapes. We break bread. These sacramental signs invite us to trust that it is in the very places we experience collapse of dreams, disintegration and endings--- the crushed and broken places --- that God is also found. Humans cannot achieve new life on their own and so we gaze in faith on the cross today. We are invited to trust that where there has been defeat, dreams shattered, relationships ended, projects frustrated--- in other words, where we have faced death, in those places, God enters and offers new life.

For example, I've noticed this new life among some of the elderly I have known. When I look at their lives from my vantage, I see limitation, decline, dependence and even disability. And, quite frankly, it frightens me as I wonder, "Is that what lies up the road for me too?" Yet, on further observation, I detect something else: for some there is also peace, resolution, courage and, yes, even joy. How can this be, when to me, so much seems over and past tense? Our eucharistic celebration today encourages us not to avoid looking at the sometimes-bitter truth of finalities and closures we all face in the course of our lives. But today's feast encourages us to also look at these painful moments through the lens of Jesus' cross and thus come to believe more and more that in the very places of death, God can raise new life. Those, who have experienced life opening for them in old age, are also ample signs to us of God's resurrection power. We praise God today for them and the witnesses they have been for us.

Paul invites us to reflect on the choices Jesus made and how God responded to them. Jesus not only accomplished a great work on our behalf, but now we are encouraged to act similarly--- to act, as he did, for the good of others. Having heard Paul's gospel message, we join him in a similar proclamation of what God has done for us in Jesus. And....our actions follow upon our faith. We will say, "Amen" when we receive the eucharist today. It is the "Amen" of faith—we believe what we have heard, and we believe in the One we are receiving. But it is also an "Amen" filled with resolution: we will, with Jesus' self-giving Spirit, practice the life Jesus has lived.

There certainly is plenty of opportunity to practice Jesus' example of sacrifice and service for the good of others. We have children, spouses, grandchildren and aged parents. We also know those in our church and local community who are in need. We are conscious too of a larger and broken world whose people need our voice and actions on their behalf. For example, each week we have listed at the end of these reflections names and addresses of people on North Carolina's death row (cf.

below). One way to celebrate this feast of the cross might be to write to one or more of them. A letter to the governor of N.C., or the governor of your own state, voicing your own and our church's opposition to the death penalty, would be another response to today's liturgical celebration. Remember, while we exalt the holy cross today--- it was still a cruel state instrument of execution.

Paul was writing to a fractured Christian community; little has changed in our church! He is encouraging Christians to put aside what is ambitious, selfish and prideful. Forgiveness and service to one another go a long way towards healing the wounds in our church and world. The world God entered was not a perfect place and no human work could make it so. But Christ has lived our life and shown us how to be faithful to our calling as Christians in the world. His Spirit was let loose through his death and resurrection. Each of us, baptized in his name, has received a share in that Spirit. This new life now breathing in us helps us to be faithful to the life Jesus has lived and died for us.

Personal note for the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross.

Henry Lee Hunt has been on North Carolina's death row for 18 years. He is to be executed on Friday, September 12<sup>th</sup>, at 2am. I have known Henry for 9 years and we have visited and written frequently. Since you will be receiving these reflections early in the week, I invite you to pray for Henry, who professes his innocence and still has two appeals pending. Also, you may call the governor's office (919-733-5811) asking for clemency for Henry. Thank you.

#### POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- James Cheek #0538027 (On death row since 7/3/97)
- Leroy Mann #0255136 (7/15/97)
- Phillip Davis #0585797 (8/22/97)
- Christopher Roseboro #0352024 (8/29/97)

-----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

## ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

James A. Wallace, *Preaching to the Hungers of the Heart: The Homily on the Feasts and Within the Rites*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2002. 196 pages, \$17.95 ISBN 0-8146-1224-5.

This is a most helpful book for preachers faced with the challenge of preaching on the great feasts of the Lord, the sacramental rites and the feasts of the saints, with special emphasis on Marian feasts. Includes a good review of the development of the modern homily as well as a spirituality for preachers.

### QUOTABLE

These feasts [of the Lord] respond to an appetite we have to connect our life with something that speaks to the deepest level of our being. A little over twenty years ago, Charles Rice wrote that most people try to connect their smaller stories to a larger one. "It is the same in the church. At our baptism, we enter into a story, a very large one; call it The Story.... Our stories merge with The Story....."

The Story of Jesus brings us first of all into an awareness and knowledge of the One who can fulfill this hunger for completeness. On the solemn feasts we remember and make present that salvation brought into being through particular events in human history, most notably the birth, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, and the giving of the Holy Spirit....

[The great feasts of the Lord] provide access into the central event in the story of Jesus, those defining moments that provide both identity and agenda for the Christian community, and into those mysteries that encapsulate Christianity's articulation of the nature of God.

----Wallace, page 31 (cf. above).

### JUSTICE NOTES

The basis for all that the Church believes about the moral dimensions of economic life is its vision of the transcendent worth -- the sacredness -- of human beings. The dignity of the human person, realized in community with others, is the criterion against which all aspects of economic life must be measured.

All human beings, therefore, are ends to be served by the institutions that make up the economy, not means to be exploited for more narrowly defined goals. Human personhood must be respected with a reverence that is religious. When we deal with each other, we should do so with the sense of awe that arises in the presence of something holy and sacred. For that is what human beings are: we are created in the image of God (Gn 1:27).

-----Economic Justice for All, #28

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”

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