

Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross - Lectionary: 638

Reading 1 - [Numbers 21:4b-9](#)

With their patience worn out by the journey, the people complained against God and Moses, "Why have you brought us up from Egypt to die in this desert, where there is no food or water? We are disgusted with this wretched food!"

In punishment the LORD sent among the people saraph serpents, which bit the people so that many of them died. Then the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned in complaining against the LORD and you. Pray the LORD to take the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people, and the LORD said to Moses, "Make a saraph and mount it on a pole, and if any who have been bitten look at it, they will live." 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.

Responsorial Psalm [Psalm 78:1bc-2, 34-35, 36-37, 38](#) - R. (see 7b) Do not forget the works of the Lord!

Reading 2 - [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. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Gospel - [John 3:13-17](#)

Jesus said to Nicodemus: "No one has gone up to heaven except the one who has come down from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.

Summary: This homily centers on the profound meaning of the cross, moving beyond its historical brutality to its spiritual significance. It emphasizes that Christ's crucifixion, though a horrific act of human cruelty, is ultimately a symbol of God's immense love and salvific mercy. It urges believers to reflect deeply on Jesus's suffering, not to dwell on the "bloody awfulness," but to understand the cost of salvation and the bridge it forms between humanity and God. This understanding should inspire a call to action, transforming believers into "missionary disciples" who embody Christ's love and are willing to sacrifice for the spread of His message. Ultimately, the cross is presented as a constant reminder of God's love and grace, a catalyst for repentance, transformation, and a commitment to living a life of active faith.

Today is the feast of the Exaltation or Triumph of the Cross. The word "Exaltation" as used in the name of today's feast means a 'lifting up', and St. John compares Jesus' being lifted up on the Cross to the incident in the Book of Numbers, when Moses lifted up the bronze serpent over the people, which we listened to in the first reading. It was a foreshadowing of the salvation through Jesus, although in a much more radical way. Jesus is lifted up so that whoever believes [has faith] in him may have eternal life, a sign of God's love for each one of us. This is a celebration of the instrument of our salvation, which is meant to remind us that Jesus saved the fallen human race not by eliminating the suffering that our own sin unleashed in the world, but by taking that suffering upon himself. He who never sinned, the 'perfectly just man', allowed himself to be punished with every conceivable kind of suffering, even to death, death on a cross. That moment of his apparent defeat was the moment of his eternal victory - the Triumph of the Cross. Why? Because suffering on earth is not the worst thing that can happen to us. We know that for certain, because Jesus himself suffered, and he was God. The worst thing that can happen is to be separated eternally from God.

For many, it is a confusing celebration, especially for those who are not among the believers in Christ. Of course, it's understandable if a person is just looking at the Cross and can't see into it. Do you recall Jesus telling his disciples at the Last Supper: "*No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.*"¹ How often do we reflect on our salvation or how deeply have you meditated on the crucifixion, and the nature of that suffering. By suffering with us even though he didn't deserve it, he showed us that he truly loves us unconditionally, no matter what, even if we crucify him. By suffering with us, Jesus showed us that we never have to suffer alone, that suffering itself, through faith in him, can become the path to wisdom, peace, and intimate friendship with God.

We cannot truly speak of Jesus' suffering on the cross without an awareness of the cruel and torturous brutality of crucifixion. In antiquity it was considered one of the most brutal and shameful modes of death. Probably originating with the Assyrians (7th century BC) and Babylonians (6th Century BC). Alexander the Great brought the practice from Persia to the eastern Mediterranean countries in the 4th century BC, and the Phoenicians introduced it to Rome in the 3rd century BC. It was virtually never used in pre-Hellenic Greece. The Romans perfected crucifixion for 500 years until it was abolished by Constantine I in the 4th century AD. In Roman times it was applied mostly to slaves, disgraced soldiers, Christians and foreigners. Death, usually after 6 hours to 4 days, was due to many excruciatingly painful parts; after-effects of compulsory scourging and maiming, hemorrhage and dehydration, causing shock and pain in the body due to insufficient blood volume, but the most important factor was progressive asphyxia caused by breathing impairment. Death was probably commonly precipitated by cardiac arrest, severe pain, body blows and breaking of the large bones. The attending Roman guards could only leave the site after the victim had died, and were known to precipitate death by means of deliberate fracturing of the tibia and/or fibula, spear stab wounds into the heart, sharp blows to the front of the chest, or a smoking fire built at the foot of the cross to asphyxiate the victim.

¹ John 15:13

This is what Jesus experienced for love of us, for love of all human beings. I think we don't reflect often enough on the truth of that experience for Christ, the price he paid. I don't think we are very willing to enter into the bloody awfulness of it. We don't want to look at it. We prefer our Christian symbols cleaned up. The reality for those disciples who were there on Calvary with Christ, Mary his mother, John the beloved disciple, the other Mary, all gathered there as he was lifted up for all to gaze upon as he lovingly, with merciful forgiveness gazed back. They could see him suffer. They could see him struggling to breathe. Imagine the anguish in their hearts not being able to do anything. They could see the blood running down his body onto the main beam into the ground and down toward them. How many of us would have the depth of love, the courage to die in such a way to save others? To save those we love. We will go to great lengths, but that that's a bridge too far.

And all of this was to help us understand the extent of God's love for each one of us. *"Because of this self-giving and self-emptying: God exalted him even more highly and gave him the name that is above every other name, so that at the name Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."* Indeed, as we heard in the Gospel, *"God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him."* Hence, we exalt the Cross and by it we express our faith. We place a cross in our churches and homes, in the classrooms of our schools and in other Christian institutions. We wear it around our necks as a constant reminder.

I think now we can reflect on the cross more deeply. *Look at the crucifix*: we see into the depths of history and human cruelty. We see the image of evil, the very thing that condemns us. We see man's inhumanity to man. We see our sins, the myriad consequences of original sin. We see the injustice of the perfectly 'just man' tortured and killed. Why? They were fueled by hatred, fear, ambition, pride, racism... and the list goes on. From our perspective, we see more than all of that. Because if that were all there was to see, it would offer no hope. How could something so awful give anyone hope. It would rather strike fear into their hearts. It would do what it was intended to do by the tyrants. It would silence people. They wouldn't stand up to it. And those who did would be moved themselves by anger and bitterness to avenge the just man's death. We see more than that. We see the way of our salvation.

Look into the crucifix: We see the sign of our salvation. When we gaze into the crucifix, we don't just look at it. We gaze upon him who is hung upon the tree. And we gaze into and see beyond the surface. We see and recall to mind his words. We see the sign of our guilt. Yes. But the symbol of salvific mercy. We might hear him say 'I do for you so that you don't have to suffer even worse.' We see into the depths of God's love for us and the extent to which God will go for his mercy. We see in the man hung on that cross authentic humanity. We see humility. We see obedience. We see in the bloody sacrifice of the just man, our hope. We see that this is the moment that makes the difference. This is the moment that bridges the chasm between man and God, the chasm forged in the actions of our first parents in that garden of incredible beauty, into which they brought darkness. We see the risen Christ. We see the formation of the mystical body of Christ, the Church. And in all of this, we hear the call to holiness, to be like him.

As we look at and into the crucifix, the fullness of our contemplation leads us to understand our need for and the cost of our salvation. It calls us to repent and believe. It calls to us, repent and believe, to a more perfect conversion to for total transformation. No one can see, gaze upon him, hear his words, and know that all of this is for me. And remain unmoved except in hardness of heart as it softens our hearts. Because we see ourselves as we are. We see God as God is. And we desire and hunger for the love that's been made manifest. It moves us to attentively listen to him and to do what he says. And what does he say to us? *"All authority [not only in the Church, but also] in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and*

*make disciples of all nations, baptizing them ... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and behold, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”*²

As we look at and gaze into the cross, we see beyond its terror, rejoicing in the way in which he has chosen to be manifestly physically present with us even to the end of the age, in the Eucharist. But this Eucharist cannot be unless this crucifixion happens. This sacrificial act of love cannot be what is meant for us unless first we are united in his sacrifice and come into the divine life made possible by his bridge forged from this torturous piece of wood. And so, we say with newfound eagerness Here I am, Lord. Here I am. Send me. I know the caves of darkness that I've inhabited in the world. I admit my guilt. By the grace of faith, I have come to believe that you are the Christ, and I have been touched by your love and by your healing, by your mercy and your grace. And I want to be part of making the world in your image, of inviting others into your heart to gaze into you to know the truth to know there is a better way for human beings to know there is peace to be found. Here I am Lord send me. Jesus gazes at us and he says, *"As the father has sent me, even so I send you."* I send you as my body, the church. I send you individually with your gifts, with your talents, with your treasures to go out into that world.

We are no longer 'outside' God, we are one with God – now two hearts beating as one; what God has joined together, let no man separate. In him, with him, and through him we go where there will be wolves, fiercer beasts even³– as he said, *"Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves."*⁴ We are not disciples with a mission; there can be no separation of those two things. The mission and the disciple are inseparable, we are Missionary Disciples. Mission, the heart of Christian life, requires the acceptance of a double death: first, the death of myself, who lives no longer for himself, for his purposes and inclinations, but for the one who *"died and was raised"* for our sake;⁵ then, the death he needs to die as a member of the Church, going from the visible Church into the hostile world. Without emphatic drama, this second death includes giving up even one's physical life, martyrdom in the narrow sense, while martyrion, as giving witness, is already identical with every aspect of the mission.⁶

No longer I but him who lives in me. No longer will I exalt myself and my will and my desires over God, but rather I will lay my life down and follow him, becoming humble and obedient. I will go where you send me, and love sacrificially. I will sacrifice plans for my future to do your will. I will sacrifice comfort for justice. I will sacrifice my reputation. I will give you all as you have given me everything. And I will exalt your cross in my life. I will do all you ask for love of you who loved me first. I will become the man or the woman that you made me to be, and I will spare no effort to do so.

Humility is of great import. Jesus modeled it for us, and in him we too can be humble. The Second Reading from the Letter of Paul to the Philippians speaks to this humility. It contains what theologians refer to as the kenosis hymn about Jesus. The Greek term Paul uses for "emptied" is *kenosis*. This *kenosis* is the ultimate expression of the humility of Jesus, who put aside all the advantages and powers of divinity in order to save us. Paul is making clear that Jesus didn't just appear to be a man, but he really was a man, with all frailties and weaknesses of human flesh, except sin. Jesus was the Incarnate Son of God and shared the divinity with his Father and the Spirit on an equal level. Yet, to bring us salvation and life without end, *"he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness."*

² Mt 28:18ff

³ Acts 20:29

⁴ Mt 10:16

⁵ 2 Cor 5:15

⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, [Life out of Death: Meditations on the Paschal Mystery](#), trans. Martina Stöckl (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), 73–75.

The kenosis of Jesus is a model for every missionary disciple, of complete self-renunciation. We too are called to “empty ourselves”—seeking God’s help and allowing God to rid us of our pride, our self-love, our unruly passions—and conform our lives to Christ’s. The result of this personal kenosis is, paradoxically, exaltation. Jesus himself said, *“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”*⁷ If we join ourselves to Jesus by emptying ourselves, then we will join him in being exalted, as we enter into union with God forever in heaven. God will at times need to teach us this humility by humbling us when we are not so willing, so that we think more of our mission and life in Christ than of our comfort. God deeply desires to form us in love and mercy, for justice and peace; to have a heart like Jesus, a heart that St John described beautifully in today's Gospel: *“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.”*

Reflecting on chapter 2 of the Book of Wisdom, can help to focus a person’s reflection.

Wisdom Chapter 2 - For, not thinking rightly, they said among themselves: “Brief and troubled is our lifetime; there is no remedy for our dying, nor is anyone known to have come back from Hades. For by mere chance were we born, and hereafter we shall be as though we had not been; Because the breath in our nostrils is smoke, and reason a spark from the beating of our hearts, and when this is quenched, our body will be ashes, and our spirit will be poured abroad like empty air. Even our name will be forgotten in time, and no one will recall our deeds. So, our life will pass away like the traces of a cloud and will be dispersed like a mist Pursued by the sun’s rays and overpowered by its heat. For our lifetime is the passing of a shadow; and our dying cannot be deferred because it is fixed with a seal; and no one returns.

Come, therefore, let us enjoy the good things that are here, and make use of creation with youthful zest. Let us have our fill of costly wine and perfumes and let no springtime blossom pass us by; let us crown ourselves with rosebuds before they wither. Let no meadow be free from our wantonness; everywhere let us leave tokens of our merriment, for this is our portion, and this our lot. Let us oppress the righteous poor; let us neither spare the widow nor revere the aged for hair grown white with time. But let our strength be our norm of righteousness; for weakness proves itself useless.

Let us lie in wait for the righteous one, because he is annoying to us; he opposes our actions, Reproaches us for transgressions of the law and charges us with violations of our training. He professes to have knowledge of God and styles himself a child of the LORD. To us he is the censure of our thoughts; merely to see him is a hardship for us, because his life is not like that of others, and different are his ways. He judges us debased; he holds aloof from our paths as from things impure. He calls blest the destiny of the righteous and boasts that God is his Father. Let us see whether his words be true; let us find out what will happen to him in the end. For if the righteous one is the son of God, God will help him and deliver him from the hand of his foes. With violence and torture let us put him to the test that we may have proof of his gentleness and try his patience. Let us condemn him to a shameful death; for according to his own words, God will take care of him.”

These were their thoughts, but they erred; for their wickedness blinded them, and they did not know the hidden counsels of God; neither did they count on a recompense for holiness nor discern the innocent souls’ reward. For God formed us to be imperishable; the image of his own nature he made us. But by the envy of the devil, death entered the world, and they who are allied with him experience it.

⁷ Luke 14:11

Key Concepts and Themes: A Theological Summary of the Homily on the Exaltation of the Cross

1.0 The Paradox of the Cross: Symbol of Suffering and Salvation

The Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross presents a profound paradox at the heart of Christian faith. It is a celebration that can seem confusing to those outside the tradition, as it elevates an instrument of historical brutality into a symbol of ultimate triumph. The homily unpacks this paradox by examining the Cross from two opposing perspectives: first, as the pinnacle of human cruelty and a tool of shameful execution, and second, as the definitive sign of God's redemptive love and the very means of salvation. This dual nature is central to understanding its significance for the believer.

Twofold Meaning of the Cross

Man's Inhumanity

From a historical and secular viewpoint, the Cross is an "image of evil." The homily details how crucifixion was considered one of the "most brutal" and "shameful" forms of execution, a practice perfected by the Romans to amplify and prolong suffering. This method, which could last for days, represents the depths of "man's inhumanity to man." When viewed through this lens, the Cross is a symbol of injustice and hatred, a tool designed by tyrants to **strike fear** into the hearts of the populace and **silence people** who might otherwise resist. It is a stark reminder of humanity's capacity for cruelty and the physical "bloody awfulness" of Christ's suffering.

God's Salvific Mercy

For the believer, this same object is transformed into the "way of our salvation." The Cross is not merely a sign of guilt but becomes "the symbol of salvific mercy." It represents the profound depth of God's love and the extraordinary lengths to which He will go to save humanity. This act of ultimate sacrifice bridges the chasm between God and humanity that was created by sin. Rather than an emblem of despair, it becomes a source of hope, demonstrating that even from the most awful suffering, God brings forth redemption and life.

Understanding this profound transformation of the Cross from a symbol of death to a sign of life requires more than a casual glance; it demands a deep and spiritual engagement with its meaning.

2.0 The Contemplative Gaze: Unveiling Deeper Truths

The homily makes a critical distinction between merely "looking at" the crucifix and actively "gazing into" it. This contemplative gaze is not a passive observation but an intentional act of meditation that allows the believer to see beyond the surface image of suffering and uncover the profound theological truths it contains. It is through this focused contemplation that the full meaning of Christ's sacrifice is revealed, moving the heart from simple observation to personal transformation.

A believer who gazes deeply into the crucifix can discern several key realities:

- **Our Own Condition:** The gaze first reveals a personal truth, showing us "the sign of our guilt." In the suffering of Christ, we recognize our own sinfulness, the consequences of original sin, and the injustice of the world, where we see "the perfectly just man tortured and killed." This reveals our fundamental need for a salvation we cannot achieve on our own.
- **The Depths of God's Love:** Contemplation uncovers the sheer scale of God's mercy and the "price he paid" for humanity. It answers the question of *why* this suffering occurred, revealing it as an act of love so profound that God was willing to endure the worst of human cruelty to save His people.
- **The Nature of Authentic Humanity:** In the figure of Christ on the Cross, the believer sees the model for "authentic humanity." His suffering is not a sign of weakness but of perfect humility and obedience to the will of the Father, providing a blueprint for how a human life can be fully oriented toward God.
- **The Hope of Redemption:** The contemplative gaze reveals that the "bloody sacrifice of the just man" is also the source of "our hope." It is the pivotal moment that bridges the chasm between humanity and God, transforming an instrument of death into a promise of life.

- **The Risen Christ:** The gaze does not terminate on an image of death. The believer sees through the suffering to its ultimate conclusion, beholding "the risen Christ" and understanding that the Cross is inseparable from the Resurrection.

- **The Birth of the Church:** From this singular act of sacrifice, the believer witnesses "the formation of the mystical body of Christ, the church." The community of faith is born from the side of the crucified Lord.

- **The Call to Transformation:** Ultimately, this experience is designed to break through a "hardness of heart." Gazing upon the crucifix is a call to "repent and believe," leading to a "total transformation" as the heart is softened by the manifest reality of God's love.

This internal conversion, born from contemplation, naturally flows outward into a life of mission, sustained by the very presence of Christ made manifest in the Eucharist—a reality only possible because of this sacrifice.

3.0 The Mandate of the Cross: The Missionary Disciple

The insights gained from contemplating the Cross are not meant to remain private but are intended to compel a believer into action as a "missionary disciple." The homily argues that this is not a role one takes on, but an identity that becomes one's very being. The mission and the disciple are "inseparable." Through Christ's sacrifice, believers are brought into a mystical union with God, where they are "no longer outside God" but are made one with Him, "two hearts beating as one." To be a follower of Christ is, by definition, to be sent out into the world from this place of intimate communion.

Accepting the Cross means embracing a specific, and often challenging, mission. The homily frames this commitment as a choice "to die two deaths," which form the heart of the Christian life. These are the core components of that mission:

1. **Accepting the Great Commission:** The mission begins with a direct command from Christ: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." This is not an optional suggestion but the foundational mandate for every believer who has been touched by the grace of the Cross.
2. **The Death of Self:** The first death is internal. To be effective, the missionary disciple must die to their own ego, pride, and personal will. This sacrifice is captured in the phrase, "No longer I but him who lives in me." It is a call to lay down one's own desires and ambitions in order to become humble and obedient, following Christ's example.
3. **The Sacrifice of Love:** The second death is communal and active, undertaken as "members of the church." The mission requires tangible, real-world sacrifices made for the sake of love. This includes laying down anger to love one's enemies, sacrificing personal comfort for the pursuit of justice, and even being willing to sacrifice one's own reputation to remain faithful to the truth of the Gospel.
4. **Embracing Persecution:** The mission is not presented as easy or safe. Christ sends his disciples "as sheep in the midst of wolves." The homily makes clear that this path may involve facing the same suffering, persecution, and abuse that Christ endured. To be a missionary disciple is to be willing to suffer for the sake of truth, faith, and justice.

These actions of self-denial, love, and courageous witness are the living expression of the truths understood through the contemplative gaze upon the Cross.

Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition from Source Context
Crucifixion	A brutal and shameful mode of death penalty in antiquity, originating around the 7th century BC and perfected by the Romans. It was applied to slaves, disgraced soldiers, Christians, and foreigners, causing death after 6 hours to 4 days from factors like scourging, hemorrhage, dehydration, and progressive asphyxia.
Eucharist	The way in which Christ has chosen to be manifestly physically present with his followers even to the end of the age. Its existence is dependent on the sacrificial act of the crucifixion.
Exaltation	A "lifting up." In the context of the Feast of the Cross, it refers to Jesus being lifted up on the cross, an act which, like Moses lifting the bronze serpent, is a sign of God's love and the instrument of salvation.
Kenosis	The Greek term for "emptied," used by St. Paul to describe the ultimate expression of Jesus's humility. It refers to Christ putting aside all the advantages and powers of divinity to take the form of a slave and assume human likeness in order to save humanity.
Missionary Disciple	The inseparable identity of a believer, who is not a disciple <i>with</i> a mission, but a person whose very being is the mission. They are sent by Christ, as he was sent by the Father, to go into the world and make disciples of all nations, sacrificing personal will and comfort for God's will.
Original Sin	The actions of humanity's "first parents" in the garden that forged a chasm between man and God. The myriad consequences of this are visible when one looks at the cross.
Righteous One (The Just Man)	A term for Jesus, the "perfectly just man" who, despite being without sin, allowed himself to be punished with every conceivable kind of suffering. The Book of Wisdom describes the mindset of those who plot against the righteous one because his holy life is a "censure of our thoughts."
Salvation	The act of being saved from eternal separation from God. The cross is the instrument of our salvation, achieved not by eliminating suffering, but by Jesus taking all suffering upon himself to bridge the gap between humanity and God.
Salvific Mercy	God's saving forgiveness and love. The cross, while a sign of human guilt, is presented as the ultimate symbol of this mercy, demonstrating the extent to which God will go for humanity.
Triumph of the Cross	The eternal victory of Christ achieved at the moment of his apparent defeat on the cross. This triumph is rooted in the understanding that suffering on earth is not the worst fate, but eternal separation from God is.