

Reflections

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The Son of Man Will Be Raised up

In John 3, 14 – 21, Jesus had taught Nicodemus the need for being born anew, to be born from the most high, to be born again from water and the Spirit in order to be able to enter the Kingdom of God. And then He told him: “As Moses lifted up the bronze serpent on a pole in the desert, in the same way the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”

Nicodemus probably did not understand what Jesus had just revealed to him, he may have been able to sense something. In regard to him, we are privileged because we are more conditioned to grasp better the meaning of these words.

Jesus alludes to the bronze serpent which Moses had erected in the desert. It happened when the Jews – tired from so many tribulations – began to murmur against God and against Moses: “Why have you made us come up from Egypt to die in the desert? God, angered, sent many terrible serpents against the people, many people died. Then they turned to Moses so he would intercede for them before God.

Moved by the leader’s supplication, the Lord had a bronze serpent made for him and had it placed on a pole. And when someone was bitten by a snake, it was enough for them to look at the bronze image in order to avoid death. It was a manifestation of God’s power, capable of freeing one from everything bad. And now the Lord applies to himself the image of the serpent from the Old Testament: He will also be raised on the mast of the Cross, in a similar way to the bronze serpent and with similar effects.

In that sense, the crucifixion of Christ does not only have a painful aspect but is, at the same time, the beginning of his glorification. According to St. John, the Lord himself said on another occasion: “When you will have elevated the Son of man, then, you will know that it is I.”

And also: “When I am elevated over the earth, I will attract all towards me.” The “elevation” of Christ is thus, the beginning of his victory: from the Cross, like a divine magnet, He will exert a universal influence, He will attract everything towards Himself.

There Jesus will be the new serpent, not like the one in Genesis who in the earthly Paradise seduced our first parents, and continued seducing the community chosen throughout history. Jesus made himself into a serpent to free us from the ancient serpent through whose envy death was introduced into the world.

He became death to free us from death. Therefore, his elevation on the Cross is already the prelude to victory, it is the essence of the Pascal Mystery: process of death and of glorification. From the bosom of the sepulchre, life blossoms forth, life which from the earth is elevated, ascends unto Heaven.

During Lent, we set off towards the celebration of this mystery which finds its most relevant moment in Holy Week. Let us raise our eyes towards Christ – elevated on the Cross – with the same confidence with which the Jews in the desert looked at the bronze serpent. Thus we will not perish. Let us look at Christ and let us believe firmly in Him because as we are told in the Gospel: “God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son so that nobody who believes in Him will perish but will have eternal life.”

Our look at Christ on the Cross should then be a look of faith, of confidence. Because we know that God did not send his Son to the world to condemn mankind but that they would be saved by Him. Therefore, let us get close to Christ, our light, our serpent, as Saint Ambrose calls Him, in confidence, in humility, let us look at Him in the eyes... and let us believe.

In Mass there is the moment of the consecration and the elevation in which Christ is “raised on high,” this time by the priest, to attract all towards Himself. Mass is the renewal of the sacrifice of the Cross, of that sacrifice which involved the first and the three endless hours of cruel “elevation” on the summit of Mt. Calvary.

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