

The Triumph of the Cross

(14 September) - A symbol often misunderstood.

Introduction

The cross is the symbol of which Christians show their faith. Yet, for three centuries, they intentionally did not use the cross as a symbol of their faith. They were recognized in other symbols—the anchor, the fish, the loaves, the dove, the shepherd—but they were reluctant to depict the cross. It evoked the infamous death of their Master, death reserved for slaves and brigands, and that was one of the motives they were ridiculed by the pagans.



Around 180 A.D., the polemicist Celsus—who knew the mythological stories in which the gods always appeared beautiful and clothed in splendor—objected to the Christians: “If the spirit of God became incarnate in a man, he must at least have excelled among all in built, beauty, strength, majesty, voice, and eloquence. Instead, Jesus had nothing more than the others. He was an overstrained wanderer; he is seen stunned, bewildered, traveled through the country in the midst of publicans and sailors of ill repute. We know how he ended, we recognize the defection of his disciples, the condemnation, the abuse, the insults, the sufferings of his torture ... and his scream from the top of the scaffold before expiring.”

The graffito found in the Palatine school, where pages destined to serve in the imperial court were taught, is famous. It dates back to 200 A.D. and depicts a young man in the act of worshiping a crucified man with a donkey’s head; the inscription reads: “Alexamenos adores his God”, an obvious caricature of Christian worship, probably made by a slave who wanted to mock a colleague who converted to the new faith.

“We proclaim a crucified Messiah. For the Jews, what a great scandal! And for the

Greeks, what nonsense!”—wrote Paul (1 Cor 1:23). But the Christians were reluctant to translate this truth into a symbol.

An exact date marks the transition to the worship of the cross: on September 14, 335 A.D., a huge crowd of pilgrims flocked from all over the world in Jerusalem. They celebrated the feast of the dedication of the basilica built by Constantine on the site of the holy sepulcher. On the rock of Calvary, the emperor had placed a wonderful jeweled cross to mark the place of Christ’s sacrifice. From that day, the cross became a Christian symbol par excellence. They started to manufacture it with the most precious metals, was embedded with pearls, appeared everywhere, on churches, on banners, on the helmet of the Prince, on the coins....

Throughout the centuries, unfortunately, from an emblem of love and a sign of the rejection of all violence, it was commuted to, at times, a banner to impose by force the “political” rights of God and often was reduced to amulets, necklaces, superstitious gesture.

Today’s feast wants to remind us of the true meaning of the cross. For seventeen centuries the Christian community loved this symbol, but not idolized it. They are aware that, the showing of crosses does not make a society Christian, but the life of Christians does. They are “crucified” and persecuted because they refuse to idolize money and power and become peacemakers.

To internalize the message, we will repeat:

“May whoever meets a Christian always see in him the Crucified One willing to offer his life.”

First reading: Numbers 21:4-9

One of the recommendations that the guides give to those who delve into the Sinai desert is never to walk barefoot. Hidden in the sand, the Sidewinders, agile and poisonous snakes, are always lurking and ready to jump on anything that comes close. Their bite can kill a person in half an hour. Even the horses are restive when they see them.

During the Exodus, the Israelites went through a particularly snake-infested area—that the biblical text called “burning,” probably because of the burning pain of their bite—and the victims were numerous.

The episode happened to coincide with a rebellion of the people that—exhausted by the fatigue of travel, of deprivation, lack of bread, and the scarcity of water—had turned to

the Lord slanderous accusation: “We thought that you would lead us to liberty and life, instead you deceived us, you have brought us out of Egypt to die in the wilderness” (vv. 4-5).

The Israelites shared with all peoples of antiquity a very archaic conception of God. That is why they believed that the snakes were a punishment sent by God to punish their sin. It was not true; it had been a completely random event. However, the sacred author interprets this as a call of the Lord, as an invitation to look always and only to him for salvation.

Moses built a bronze serpent and set him on a pole convinced that those who, after being bitten, had contemplated on it, would be healed.

Among the peoples of antiquity, the serpent was a mysterious and ambiguous figure: it was a sign of death and a symbol of life; it can be injected as poison or it can offer health and immortality. Coiled around the staff of Aesculapius, it represented healing; it was believed that the peeling of the skin would confer him a perennial youthfulness.

The gesture made by Moses was certainly inspired by this beneficial symbolism and probably should be compared to the magical and idolatrous practices of antiquity. Even in the temple of Jerusalem, a bronze serpent that was believed to be the one lifted up by Moses in the desert was revered for centuries. King Hezekiah tore it to pieces because he considered it an object of idolatrous worship (2 K 18:4).

What message did the sacred author want to transmit by referring to this curious episode? The rabbis explained that the Israelites were not healed because they had looked at the snake, but because they had elevated their heart to God. It was the Lord who had saved them, not the effigy of bronze. The Book of Wisdom commented on the incident: “For whoever turned towards it was saved, not by the image he saw, but by you, O Lord, the Savior of all” (Wis 16:7).

This account prepares us to understand the significance of the gaze that a Christian must keep fixed on the Crucifix.

Second Reading: Philippians 2:6-11

When Paul writes to the Christians at Philippi, he is in prison. We would expect that he is both discouraged and disheartened. Instead, he is filled with joy. He takes up the theme for sixteen times in his letter. He is happy because he has peace in his heart; his chains, instead of being a hindrance to the proclamation of the gospel, have proven to be a valuable and convincing testimony to his own jailers. He is happy also because, once again, he has experienced the tender affection and gratitude of the

Philippians.

The Philippians' kindness and generosity were known throughout Macedonia. Paul's cultivated sympathy for them was also well known. However, as happens even in the best community, there were some tensions also in Philippi. Nothing serious: petty jealousies among the priests, a bit of someone's ambition to attract attention to oneself, two women who, while very committed and available in service to others, were often bickering.

Very gently, so as not to offend his friends, Paul refers to these problems in his letter.

First of all, he reminds them of the principle that should guide interpersonal relationships: Do nothing through rivalry or vain conceit. On the contrary, let each of you gently consider that other as more important than yourselves. Do not seek your own interest but rather that of others (Phil 2:3-4). Then, dealing with the central theme of the evangelical moral proposal, he recalls the example of Christ: Your attitude should be the same as Jesus Christ had (Phil 2:5).

It is at this point that a wonderful hymn was introduced in the letter. It was composed probably in Ephesus and performed in all the communities of Asia Minor (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16), especially during the celebration of baptisms at the Easter Vigil. It is the passage of today's reading.

He reviews three moments of the story of Jesus Christ. The first (v. 6) is the reference to his pre-existence. Christ did not begin to exist at the moment of his conception in Mary's womb. From eternity, even before becoming man, he existed "in the form of God." This is the central affirmation of our faith: the divinity of Christ.

And what did he do? Did he perhaps selfishly isolate himself in his divine status? Did he want to hold jealously to himself his equality with God?

The hymn responds by telling what happened in the second moment of his story (vv. 7-8): he descended into our midst. He has not kept to himself his "equality with God," but "emptied himself." He stripped himself of his greatness and took on our humanity.

When one reflects on the Incarnation of the Son of God, the greatest danger is not the denial of his divinity, but to think that he took on a material body, like a suit of which, at the end of his life, he then stripped himself of to return to the blessed condition as before.

If so, he would not have really totally immersed himself into our human reality. To show his love he did the most unexpected, more inconceivable gesture, even the most difficult to accept by our way of reasoning. He abandoned his glorious condition and took on "human likeness." He, infinite love, enclosed himself in the finite, in a body like

ours, taken from the dust of the earth; immortal he became mortal; Almighty has chosen to share our weakness and our ignorance; he knew our passions and emotions and is tied in all to our fate. Like us, he had to learn, was seized with doubts, tasted joys and disappointments and grew hopes.

He did not appear to our eyes as an angelic, sublime being but in the lowliness and weakness of our human reality. In this downward movement, he did not stop at a high level. He did not appear among the aristocrats, the celebrities who flaunt beauty and wealth, exhibiting strength and holding power. He would have drawn upon himself the admiration of the world and would have been considered a successful man.

Instead, he chose to share the condition of the slave, the person to whom the Romans reserved the death of the cross. A loser then, a failure? According to the criteria of this world certainly yes. But how does God think of it? How was the life of this man—God evaluated in heaven?

The answer is given in the third moment of the hymn (vv. 9-11).

Reversing the judgments of this world, the Lord exalted him. He recognized him as "the authentic man," who perfectly conforms to the model he had in mind when he formed Adam from the earth. Before this man, all the beings of heaven, earth, and the underworld bend their knees.

What is this surprising triumph? The images are taken from a court's life. The great rulers heaped honors on the glorious general of their armies, made them sit at their right and forced the humiliated, dismayed and defeated enemies to crawl at their feet.

Will we see such a scene in heaven? Anna, Caiaphas, the members of the Sanhedrin, Herod ... will be shamed before Christ? It would be a sad sight! It would be a denial of the whole Gospel message and a confirmation that also in heaven greatness and success are valued according to the parameters of this world. It would be an invitation to consider the coming of God among us as a miserable and unhappy spell, not as his most glorious moment, one in which he was able to show to man how much he loves him.

The conclusion of the history of the world will be different: every knee will bend ... to the new concept of greatness, the one perfectly embodied in Christ, the slave who stoops to wash the feet of man.

In heaven, the positions will not be reversed: God will continue to wash the feet of man. When he came among us, he did not play a pathetic scene in which, for a moment, he pretended to be a servant, but has revealed to us who he is, by his nature: love always and only willing to serve.

Gospel: John 3:13-17

In John's Gospel, the characters are real and concrete individuals. However, the way in which the evangelist portrays them shows clearly that he wants to present them as figures type, as symbols of life choices, of acceptance or refusal of the light of Christ. They represent the broad spectrum of spiritual attitudes that can be taken before the mystery of Jesus.

The Samaritan appears as the woman-Israel, unfaithful bride that the Lord has come to take back with great love (Jn 4); Martha is the image of the disciple who is generous in the service of their brothers and sisters; Mary is the expression of gratuitous love, genuine nard that with its delicious aroma reveals to the world the presence of a Christian community. Judas is the anti-disciple, he who does not understand the gratuity, thinks in terms of buying and selling. He takes possession of what belongs to the brothers and considers it his property (Jn 12:1-8); Thomas is the man who, believing, demands verifiable evidence (Jn 20:24-29).

Some characters are known only through the Gospel of John. Lazarus is the disciple who, dead, sits alive at the laden banquet in the house of the community, because the Lord of life brought him into the world of the resurrected (Jn 12:1); "The disciple whom Jesus loved" is the anonymous character that embodies all attitudes of the authentic disciple; the evangelist proposes him as a model to the community.

And so we come to Nicodemus, a remarkable man among the Pharisees—perhaps a member of the Sanhedrin; he is also unknown to the synoptic tradition. Taking advantage of the dark, but also of the peace and quiet of the night, he goes to Jesus. What drives him to seek this encounter?

He appears twice in John's Gospel.

During a festival of booths, he witnesses an animated discussion involving common people, guards, high priests, and some eminent members of the Pharisee sect. He listens in silence, then, quietly, he lets out a provocative account: "Does our law condemn people without first hearing them and knowing the facts?" He receives a mocking reply: "Look it up and see for yourself that no prophet is to come from Galilee" (Jn 7:40-52).

We find him again on Calvary, with Joseph of Arimathea. He wraps the body of Jesus in bandages, along with aromatic oils that he has brought and lays him in the tomb (Jn 19:39-40).

Loyal, responsible and even courageous, Nicodemus was impressed by Jesus'

character. He had recognized him as “a teacher come from God”; he understood that no one could do these signs that he was doing if God were not with him (Jn 3,2).

What signs was he referring to?

We are at the beginning of the public life and it is the first time that Jesus comes to Jerusalem. No miracle was attributed to him in the holy city. What is only noted is that “Jesus stayed in Jerusalem during the Passover Festival, and many believed in his Name when they saw the miraculous signs he performed” (Jn 2:23).

The only incident that happened in Jerusalem and narrated by the evangelist is the purification of the temple. Was that provocative gesture the sign that shocked Nicodemus and awakened in him anxieties and questions long removed about God, the worship and the religious institution? It's possible and the context would seem to suggest it.

A pure-hearted Israelite, “teacher of Israel”—as Jesus calls him—and therefore knowledgeable of the Scriptures, he realized the incompatibility between the religion of the heart preached by the prophets and the hypocritical worship accompanied by injustice and the oppression of the poor. He saw the simple people go to the temple to seek the face of God and he saw them upset in front of the market. Who was that Jesus of Nazareth who had dared to react that way to the profanation of the sanctuary? He felt the need to know him, to sift through what happened, to understand, beyond the prejudices and the opinions that were circulating, who he really was.

In the Gospel of John, Nicodemus is the honest Israelite who seeks the truth. The darkness of the night when we see him moving is both real and symbolic: it indicates the condition of one who gropes in darkness but is eager to find the light and sensed the one who can give it to him.

Today's Gospel passage offers us the final part of the monolog spoken by Jesus before Nicodemus. It begins with a reminder of the episode of the bronze serpent (vv. 13-15), which we found in the first reading. Jesus interprets it as a symbol of what is going to happen to him: “the Son of man will be lifted up on the cross” and “those who will contemplate him” will have eternal life.

Nicodemus was a faithful observer of the Law, and yet, like the rich young man (Mt 19:20), he realized that something was missing in order to inherit eternal life. Jesus had told him that it was necessary to “be born from above” and he had misunderstood it. He thought he should be “born again” from the maternal womb. Now, he understands even less the lifting up of the Son of Man.

He could not understand: he lacked the light of the Risen One. Jesus' words were for him a mystery. He must have been a little disappointed. Only after the events of Easter, recalling that night meeting, he understood what the Master had said.

To us today, the discourse of Jesus to Nicodemus is instead immediately clear: look to Jesus "lifted up" means "to believe in him" (v. 15), to keep your eyes fixed on the love that he has shown on Calvary. Salvation comes from faith, from adhesion to the proposal of life, which made concrete on the cross. It is the man hanging from the gallows, the one who reveals to us how much God loves us and makes us realize how far our love for people should reach.

Looking at the Crucifix, we realize how the serpent's venom is able to provoke evil: it can induce to kill the innocent. But in Jesus' gift of life, the antidote to this poison is presented to us: the gratuitous love, without conditions, offered also to those who take away our lives.

The cross is not an amulet worn around the neck or a symbol to mark the conquest of a territory or the making of an environment sacred. It is the reference point of each gaze of the believer who, in it, sees summarized the proposal made to him by the Master of life.

On the cross, the slaves met their end, only the slaves. From the cross, Jesus proclaimed that a successful person according to God is the one who volunteers oneself as slave for love; he makes of himself a servant of the brothers to the point of giving his life, even for the enemies.

At every moment, we come across snakes that can poison our existence. They lurk outside of us, but above all within ourselves. They are the craving for possessions, the frenzy of power, the desire to appear. Only an eye directed to him who was lifted up can cure us of death's venom that these snakes are always ready to inoculate into the heart of every person. But one day—ensures the evangelist—all "they shall look on him whom they have pierced" (Jn 19:37) and be saved.

In the second part of the passage (vv. 16-21) we have a theological meditation on the mission of the Son of man: God did not send him "to condemn the world; but that the world might be saved through him."

Unlike Matthew who, to recall the importance and the eternal consequences of the choices made today, uses the image of the final judgment, John uses a different language more suited to the mentality of today. He, in fact, excludes that God judges man and speaks of a judgment, in the present, that saves.

The theological positions of Matthew and John seem contradictory; in fact, while using

different images, the two evangelists offer the same truth. The judgment of God is not a condemnation, but a blessing and is not pronounced at the end of time, but now and it is a judgment that saves.

In front of each option that we are called to do, the Lord shall utter his voice to show us what is right according to the wisdom of heaven and to warn us from death choices proposed by the foolishness of the world.

Today's feast also reveals how God expresses his judgment: He does not pronounce forensic judgments; he indicates the successful man, Jesus lifted up on the cross and invites everyone to evaluate his life on Jesus'. According to the criteria of this world, the cross is the sign of defeat and failure of a lifetime; according to the judgment of God, it is the supreme proof of love.

No wonder that—as Paul writes to the Corinthians—the world considers foolishness this heavenly wisdom (1 Cor 1:17-25).

Fernando Armellini