

The Serpent and Sin
4th Sunday of Lent (B)
(Jn 3:14-21)

St. John proclaims how God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, not to condemn but to save the world (Jn 3:16). Salvation comes through faith in Christ, and this faith is expressed in repentance.

Jesus explains to Nicodemus that “*just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up*” (Jn 3:14). He is referring to the time God punished the Israelites for their rebellion by sending serpents among them to bite and kill them, and then afterward commanded Moses to fix an image of the serpent on a pole and hold it up before the people, that seeing the bronze image they might be healed and spared (Nm 21:4-9). The serpent is a symbol of sin. By holding up the serpent before the people Moses is confronting them with their sin, which they have chosen instead of God, and which they must now acknowledge in shame and repent of.

Likewise, Jesus on the Cross presents to us not the symbol but the reality of sin. It is our sin which is being nailed to the cross—on the cross Jesus “*became sin*” (2Cor 5:21). The Cross confronts us with our evil, that we might repent and be healed. This is the faith in Christ which saves: not a superficial faith that glosses over sin and thinks somehow they don’t matter or are not serious, but a faith that recognizes the true depravity of our shameful rebellions.

St. John goes on to explain how faith in Christ brings light. In him we recognize whether our deeds are “done in God” or not. Those who are condemned avoid the Cross, so that they might continue to sin without shame. Those who come before the crucifix acknowledge their sin in humble repentance, which is exposed by the cruel death of the Savior.

Therefore we constantly lift up the crucifix before our eyes: in the church, at home, and also publicly before the evil of the world. During Lent we participate in the devotional Stations of the Cross. Above all, we focus on the Passion of the Lord so that we might make a good Confession of our sins and prepare our hearts for the gift of salvation, given at Easter and in Baptism.

By going regularly to Confession throughout the year, we try to live our lives always “in the light,” constantly examining our deeds to ensure they are done in the Lord, and repenting of any which are found to be sinful. We must not hold back from Confession due to fear, laziness, or pride; we must confront our sin directly. God so loved the world that He gave His Son for its salvation. In this is salvation: the recognition of our sin before the crucifix where he is lifted up, sincere repentance, and humble confession.