

Today is the feast of the exaltation of the cross; crucifixion was one of the most horrific methods of torture devised by man. Why do we celebrate (exalt) an instrument of torture? Why do most Catholic churches have miniature replicas of these torture devices in their sanctuaries? Why do many of us wear smaller ones around our necks or carry them in our pockets? Many non-Catholics ask those questions the first time they enter a Catholic church and see the crucifix in the sanctuary, especially if it is a particularly bloody one. The Good Friday liturgy gives us the answer. As the priest or deacon enters the church carrying the cross, he says or chants three times: "Behold the wood of the cross on which hung the salvation of the world."

That chant connects directly to our first reading. First, the context of the reading. The people were complaining about the wretched food—it is presumed that they were referring to the manna—the bread of angels which God gave them for their journey. God sent serpents into the camp as punishment. Why serpents? Other times he sent quail. He could have sent yellowjackets or flies or a plague of any other thing. Or he could have withheld the manna. The poisonous serpents struck at the people and caused them to die. That goes back to the Garden of Eden. The serpent represents sin and its consequences. Sending the serpents into the camp of the Israelites was a subtle reminder and warning of their sinful behavior. But then God provided a remedy, just like he promised to Adam and Eve in Eden. Moses made a bronze serpent and nailed it to a wooden post and through God's grace—nothing to do with the serpent—those who looked upon the serpent were cured.

The serpent could have been nailed to the post perpendicularly—making the shape of a cross—or it could have been nailed up so it dangled there in line with the post. Both are foreshadowing of the cross on Calvary. The perpendicular serpent obviously represents a cross, the hanging serpent represents Jesus. Did I just say that the serpent, a symbol of sin, represents Jesus who was totally sinless? Yes. There is a short sentence in Second Corinthians in which Paul wrote that Jesus became sin for our sake. What that really means is that Jesus took all of the sins of the world—past, present, and future—onto himself. When he was nailed to the cross, so were they. When he died, so did they. When he rose from the dead, they did not.

The Philippians reading we just heard. Jesus, although he was God, did not claim the power of God. He humbled himself and accepted death on the cross. He did this, as it says in the gospel, because God so loved the world that he sent his son into the world not to condemn the world, but to save the world.

Because Jesus is God, and he willingly took on the penalty of death for our sins, when he died and was resurrected, he killed the power sin and death have over us. Yes, we still sin. Yes, we still die. We still suffer..."Let a broken heart stand as the price we gotta pay." But because Jesus hung upon the wood of the cross, sin, suffering, and death no longer have eternal power over us, provided we repent of our sins and ask God to forgive us.

The cross is the instrument through which God chose to free us from eternal slavery to the devil, sin, and death. We exalt the wood of the cross, because the salvation of the world, Jesus, allowed himself to be nailed to it. His blood soaked into its wood, sanctifying it and freeing us. The cross was an instrument. Jesus is the savior.

But...Saint Paul wrote in the letter to the Colossians: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church." Jesus paid the price in full, he redeemed us, but he left room for us to add our sufferings to his own. This is why we can speak of redemptive suffering. When we accept the broken hearts and everything else the world throws at us and offer it to Jesus, he gives them meaning. The sufferings we experience in this life are invitation from Jesus to walk alongside him on the way of the cross and, in doing so, help him help our brothers and sisters.

When we look at the cross, we must thank Jesus for what he did for us and we must ask ourselves, "How am I going to respond? Having been rescued by Jesus, how can I help him rescue my brothers and sisters?"