

# *Gratitude Foundation*

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***“Were not ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?  
Has only this foreigner returned to give thanks to God?”***

(Lk. 17:15-17)

## **Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross**

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***“In all things give thanks, it is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus”***

(1 Thess: 5:18)

# Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross

## 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!**  
Hearken, my people, to my teaching;  
incline your ears to the words of my mouth.  
I will open my mouth in a parable,  
I will utter mysteries from of old.  
R. **Do not forget the works of the Lord!**

While he slew them they sought him  
and inquired after God again,  
Remembering that God was their rock  
and the Most High God, their redeemer.  
R. **Do not forget the works of the Lord!**

But they flattered him with their mouths  
and lied to him with their tongues,  
Though their hearts were not steadfast toward him,  
nor were they faithful to his covenant.  
**R. Do not forget the works of the Lord!**

But he, being merciful, forgave their sin  
and destroyed them not;  
Often he turned back his anger  
and let none of his wrath be roused.  
**R. 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.

## **Alleluia**

**R. Alleluia, alleluia.**  
We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you,  
because by your Cross you have redeemed the world.  
**R. Alleluia, alleluia.**

# 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.

# Exegesis

## Numbers 21:4b-9

*Numbers* apparently gets its name from the census figures in chapters 1 and 26 and perhaps all the mathematical data included in the book. It is a story of the Israelite's wandering years in the wilderness traveling from oppression in Egypt to the Promised Land. The first census takes place near the beginning of those years, and the final census occurs near the end as they approach the Promised Land.

The setting of our pericope takes place during the wandering years in the desert. Moses is leading the people from Mt. Sinai through the desert. Moses is burdened repeatedly by the grumbling and discontent of the people. While enjoying the gift of manna daily, the people are complaining about the lack of meat for their meals. "We remember the fish we used to eat without cost in Egypt, and the cucumbers, the melons, the leaks, the onions and the garlic. But now we are famished, we have nothing before us but this manna." (Num 11:5-6).

God acknowledges the murmuring and ingratitude of the people and God hears Moses' concerns. God responds by sending quail for the people to eat. Like manna, the quail fall from the sky. "There arose a wind sent by the Lord, that drove the quail from the sea and brought them down over the camp site at a height two cubits from the ground for the distance of a day's journey all around the camp." (Num 11:31). Ironically many of the people got sick and died after eating the quail. They understand it as punishment for their ingratitude.

The people continue to complain against Moses and Aaron, and they even form a council against them. (See Nm 20: 2). "Why did you lead us out of Egypt, only to bring us to this wretched place which has neither grain nor figs nor vines nor pomegranates? Here there is not even water to drink. (Nm 20: 5-9).

The lack of gratitude for the saving hand of God delivering them from the slavery and cruel treatment of the Egyptians and a continued lack of gratitude for the gifts that God has provided on their journey is striking. Now they are complaining about the quality of what God has provided. "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.'" (Nm 21: 5).

The Israelites encounter poisonous snakes and people die from their venomous bite. The bite resulted in a painful burning sensation such that they called them fiery serpents. The people conclude that God is punishing them for their ingratitude. "Then the people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned in complaining against the Lord and you. Pray the Lord take the serpents from us.'" (Nm 21:7). Moses prays, but God does not take the serpents away. Instead, God provides a safe haven from their venom. God instructs Moses to create a replica of the serpent and mount it on a pole. Anyone who gazes upon the bronze serpent after being bitten will live. The Book of Wisdom describes the ritual as follows: "For when the dire venom of beasts came upon them and they were dying from the bite of the crooked serpents, Your anger endured not to the end. But as a warning, for a short time they were terrorized, though they had a sign of salvation, to remind them of the precept of Your law. For he who turned toward it was saved, not by what he saw, but by You, the savior of all." (Wis 16: 5-7).

The replica of the bronze serpent that Moses made became a part of ritual and worship until the religious reforms of King Hezekiah (725-697 B.C.) "He (Hezekiah) smashed the bronze serpent called Nehushtan which Moses had made, because up to that time the Israelites were burning incense to it." (2 Kgs 18: 4). The name *Nehushtan* is derived from a combination of the Hebrew word for *bronze* (*nehoset*) and the Hebrew word for *serpent* (*nahas*).

St. Paul refers to this passage from Numbers in 1 Corinthians. "Let us not test Christ as some of them did and suffer death by the serpents." (1 Cor 10: 9).

Jesus makes direct reference to this passage and instructs us that it is a foreshadowing of His Cross. "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." (Jn 3: 14). God did not take the serpents away from the people, but for those who gazed upon the replica of the serpent held up on a pole, they lived. In a similar way God does not take away the cost of sin, death. But, God does provide the antidote for death, those who gaze upon the Cross with faith shall live forever!



## Exegesis (Continued)

### Psalm 78:1bc-2, 34-35, 36-37, 38

Psalm 78 is titled *A New Beginning in Zion and David* in some bibles and in other translations it is titled *God's Goodness and Israel's Ingratitude*. It is a lengthy song consisting of 72 verses. It provides an historical account of God's goodness from delivery of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt to the beginning of the reign of King David. Verse two sets the stage, "I will open my mouth in a parable, drawing lessons from of old." History proclaims the goodness of the Lord. History also reveals infidelity and ingratitude among the Israelite People. The author is calling on the people to remember or literally not-forget the saving acts of God for which they should remain grateful.

The Hebrew word that is translated as *parable* in verse two is *masal*. *Masal* describes a wisdom saying, a proverb, or a wise instruction. In the context of Psalm 78 *masal* is describing a wise instruction based on a history of God's interaction with His people in past generations. The instruction includes a reminder of the powerful and gracious acts of God, the ingratitude and rebellion and unfaithfulness of the people, God's chastisement or fraternal correction, and God's willingness to forgive, restore and save His beloved children.

Our pericope today follows the remembrance of the gift of Manna in the desert, and the gift of quail, and the people continued to grumble. Then the people encountered the fiery serpents and many perished in the desert. In their distress they came to realize their ingratitude, and they turn back to God seeking His pardon, forgiveness and healing.

*While He slew them, they sought Him and inquired after God again, remembering that God was their rock and the Most High God, their redeemer.* The Prophet Hosea describes this movement in a similar passage. "I will return again to My place, until they acknowledge their guilt and seek My face, and in their distress earnestly seek Me." The Hebrew word for *rock* is *sur*. The image of God as Rock is prevalent throughout sacred scripture, beginning with Deuteronomy Chapter 32: "The Rock; how faultless are His deeds, how right all His ways! A faithful God, without deceit, how just and upright He is!" (Deut 32: 4). Often God is referred to as a Rock of refuge in time of distress. "I love you Lord, my strength, Lord, my Rock, my fortress, my deliverer, my God, my Rock of refuge, my shield, my saving horn, my stronghold!" (Ps 18: 2-3). The image describes the immutability of God, while we are unfaithful, God remains faithful. It describes the steadfast, unchanging love of God. The psalmist is instructing us to remember this always.

*But they flattered him with their mouths and lied to him with their tongues, though their hearts were not steadfast toward him, nor were they faithful to his covenant.* The Prophet Isaiah recalls this reality as well. "The Lord said: 'Since this people draws near with words only and honors Me with their lips alone, though their hearts are far from Me, and their reverence for Me has become routine observance of the precepts of men, therefore, I will again deal with this people in a surprising and wonderful fashion...' (Is 29: 13-14). Whereas we are often unfaithful to God, God remains faithful to His covenant promises.

*But he, being merciful, forgave their sin and destroyed them not; Often he turned back his anger and let none of his wrath be roused.* This verse calls us to remember the renewal of the Tablets, the Ten Commandments. "Thus, the Lord passed before him (Moses) and cried out, 'the Lord, the Lord, a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in kindness for a thousand generations, and forgiving wickedness and crime and sin...' (Ex 34: 6-7). Again, as the people revolted in the desert the Lord promised them His pardon. "The Lord answered: 'I pardon them as you have asked. Yet, by My life and the Lord's glory that fills the whole earth, of all the men who have seen My glory and the signs I have worked in Egypt and in the desert, and who nevertheless have put Me to the test ten times already and have failed to heed My voice, not one shall see the land I promised on oath to their fathers.'" (Num 14: 20-23). We are called to remember the Lord's compassion and mercy, but also His justice.

## Exegesis (Continued)

### Philippians 2:6-11

In his first letter to the world, *God is Love*, Pope Benedict XVI points to the Cross of Jesus and says, “This is where the definition of love must begin.” I certainly agree with that statement. In a similar vein I would point to the Cross and say, “This is where the definition of humility must begin.” This is the ultimate act of humility in human history. At its deepest level pride says, “I do not need God.” Humility is the opposite of pride and therefore humility is coming to understand our total dependence on God for our very existence. Jesus totally surrenders Himself into the arms of His Father.

Scholars believe that our scripture passage today is a common hymn of the early Church that predates St. Paul’s conversion. The understanding is that St. Paul is merely reciting the hymn to communicate his point. Paul is calling on the people of Corinth to put on the heart and mind of Christ. Chapter 2 is titled *Plea for Unity and Humility*. The hymn is set up by the immediately preceding verses. “Do nothing out of selfishness or out of vainglory; rather, humbly regard others as more important than yourselves, each not looking out for his own interests, but everyone for those of others. Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God...” (Phil. 2:3-5)

The word *form* in the original Greek is *morphe*. *Morphe* describes a mode of being, i.e. Jesus is divine. Our creed describes Jesus as being one in substance with the Father. Yet, Jesus in an ultimate act of humility, chose to be fully human without divine influence. He is God choosing to pour out His life for us, a total emptying. Psalm 22:15 describes it as follows: “Like water my life drains away...” In a similar vein Paul would later talk about being poured out like a libation. Even in death, as the side of Jesus was pierced, blood and water flowed from His side, total outpouring of life and love.

St. Anselm would call this emptying of God as *the marvelous exchange*. He became totally human so that we might one day share divine life. Jesus had to willingly divest Himself of His divinity.

St. Paul would further describe this marvelous exchange in his second letter to the Corinthians: “For you know the gracious act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that for your sake He became poor although He was rich, so that in His poverty you might become rich.” (2 Cor 2: 9). St. Gregory of Nyssa describes this gift as follows: “Christ emptied Himself by compressing the glory of His Godhead within our smallness. What He always was remained perfect and incomprehensible, but what He assumed was in proportion to the measure of our nature.”<sup>1</sup>

In his famous speech at Pentecost Peter describes the exaltation of Jesus: “This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore **exalted** at the right hand of God and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says,

“‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.””

Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.” (Acts 2: 32-36).

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1. St. Gregory of Nyssa; *Against Apollinarius*.

## Exegesis (Continued)

### John 3:14-21

*"No one has gone up to heaven except the one who has come down from heaven, the Son of Man."* The descent of Jesus, who humbles Himself to share in our humanity, comes before the raising up, the exaltation and the ascension of Christ to the right hand of the Father in heaven. The hymn that St. Paul recites (our second reading) describes this ultimate act of humility in human history.

*"And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up."* Jesus recalls the story of the Fiery Serpents from the 21<sup>st</sup> Chapter of Numbers. As a response to the grumbling of the people God sent seraph or fiery serpents that were biting the people, and they were dying from its poison. The people asked Moses to pray to God to take away the serpents. Moses did but God did not take away the serpents. Instead, He provided the antidote for those who had faith. Moses was instructed to hang a replica bronze serpent on a pole. Those who gazed upon the bronze serpent would be saved from the poison. He did not take away the snakes nor did he stop them from biting, but He took away the sting of death for those who believed. This reminds us of the fact that salvation is a healing gift that requires a response, a personal choice and an ascent of faith. Death is still with us, but to those of faith, death no longer has the last word.

The Greek word that is translated in this verse *lifted up* is *hypsoo*. Whereas *hypsoo* can describe the physical lifting of something or someone, it also means to be exalted, to be elevated to a high position, to be glorified spiritually. The Cross, the symbol of the most cruel, hideous and shameful death will become the universal symbol of love and of life, because of the One who would humble Himself to embrace it.

*"So that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life."* The Greek word translated as *believed* in this verse and in verse sixteen is *pisteuo*. The word carries with it our common understanding of the word *faith*. It means a system of beliefs that we hold and profess. It means trust and confidence. It means loyalty, fidelity and assurance. As it is portrayed throughout Sacred Scripture it takes on an even deeper meaning. It connotes a deep, abiding, personal relationship of love, even a sharing of life. This deep abiding relationship is made possible by the justification that comes from the dying and rising of Jesus. By the Paschal Mystery we are set free to enter this communion of love with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Jesus prayed, "I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word so that they may all be one, as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they may also be in Us." (Jn 17: 20-21). The Greek words that are translated as *eternal life* in this verse and the following are *aionios zoe*. *Aionios* means forever or perpetual. *Zoe* is a word that is used to describe life that is of the Spirit, that has the life-breath of God as its source. It is distinct from the Greek word *bios* that describes biological 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.* The Greek word for *loved* in this verse is *agapao* which describes the special self-giving love that God is, and therefore the source of. The Greek word translated as *only* is *monogenes* which means one and only, or all of oneself. Why did Jesus include this word *only* as in *only Son*? Why did He not simply say, *God gave His Son*? It reminds us that God gives us His all. The gift of God's all begs a response of our all. A gift is not a gift until it is received. We must accept the gift. With that gift comes an illumination of the heart and mind. St. Augustine called this divine illumination. It is the gift dimension of faith. Faith is one of the three theological virtues, as God is the source. Faith also, because of the gift of free-will, requires a personal response. John 3:16 reminds us that faith is both gift and response and so salvation is both gift and response. Salvation is a "two-way street." It begs the question, "What about those who do not believe in Him?"



## Reflection

Today we celebrate the Exaltation of the Cross of Jesus. The cross was once the ancient symbol of a shameful death, the epitome of man's inhumanity to man. The cross is absent from Christian art for the first several centuries because of its dark negative image. Over the centuries the Cross has evolved as the universal symbol of love and of eternal life. The Cross is exalted because Christ is risen and is now seated at the right hand of the Father.

When speaking of the Ascension of Jesus St. Paul writes in his *Letter to the Ephesians*: "What does 'he ascended' mean except that he also descended into the lower regions of the earth? The one who descended is also the one who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things." (Eph 4:10). In the *Apostles Creed* we say the He descended into Hell. In the original Creed it was said that He descended to the depth of Hell. Jesus traveled to the depth of God forsakenness for us, then was raised from the dead and ascended to the highest heavens, so that in the words of St. Paul He might "fill all things." As painful as the physical crucifixion must have been the pain of the denial, betrayal and abandonment must have been even more excruciating for Jesus.

Jesus, the Eternal Word, humbled Himself to be born into our human condition. He walked into the waters of the Jordan River in deep solidarity with us. He becomes one of us in all things but sin. He must share in all things including death, even death on a cross. Jesus travels to the depth of God forsakenness for us. From the agony of the cross he cries out, "My God, My God why have you forsaken Me." (Mk 15:34) In the ancient Creed of the Church, Christians proclaimed, "He descended to the depth of hell." Jesus goes to the depth of God forsakenness for us. He experiences real death, separation from His father's love. He becomes separated from the life-giving breath of His Father. He, through whom all things came into being, ceases to be! He humbles Himself in order to save us.

From the cross He could hear the bystanders jeer, "Save yourself and come down from the cross." (Mk 15:30). The chief priests and the scribes mocked him, saying, "He saved others; he cannot save himself." (Mk 15:31). He did not come into the world to save Himself. He came to save us! He who was without sin had no need of salvation. We sinners need a savior. Out of love for us and in obedience to the Father, Jesus remained on the cross, fastened with nails and hatred, but held there by love. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, so that those who believe in Him might not perish but might have eternal life." (Jn 3:16). He humbled Himself to share in our humanity so that we may share in His divinity. We look back at the cross from the vantage point of the empty tomb and we give thanks, and we remember.

At the moment of His death the temple veil was torn from top to bottom. That which once separated us from God is destroyed forever. After three days of darkness and separation, God breathed His life breath back into His Son. The Spirit that Jesus surrendered from the cross now raises Him from the dead. Jesus breathed that Spirit on the apostles in the upper room that first Easter Sunday evening and poured it upon the Church at Pentecost. The same Spirit is now with us, the Lord and giver of Life. Come Holy Spirit fill the hearts of us Your faithful and enkindle in us the fire of Your love.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Fr. Glenn".

## Personal Witness

I was raised in a very devout Catholic home. The Crucifix of Jesus was everywhere including over the head of my bed. We prayed the rosary as a family and so I held the Crucifix in my hand as a very small child. In our parish there remains today a very large and graphic Crucifix over the altar. It was on the wall of our classroom in school. Jesus on the cross was very familiar to me, maybe too familiar. It was close yet it seemed like something of the distant past in a far and away land.

As I reflect on my relationship with the Crucified Lord over the years I can identify two very significant spiritual awakenings. The first occurred when I was in my early thirties, before priesthood was even on my mind. I had recently lost a very close friend in an automobile accident and that sent me to search for answers. It was the middle of Lent, and I was drawn to a parish mission. The mission was being directed by three Franciscan Priests of the order of St. Maximilian Kolbe. I heard the story of Fr. Kolbe in very gruesome detail for the first time. Fr. Kolbe was the prisoner at Auschwitz that stepped forward and took another prisoner's place in the starvation bunker. The priest pointed to the crucifix over the altar while looking directly at me and said: "Did not Jesus do the same for you, did he not take your place, did he not die for you?" I literally moved from sitting to kneeling and as I did the entire congregation followed. For the first time in my life the Cross became personal! As I fell to my knees in thanksgiving, I felt this incredible regret that I had never thanked Jesus for taking my place, for taking away my sins, and for dying for me.

As it were, that following Holy Thursday, I was invited to have my feet washed during Mass. I thought of an excuse and declined the invitation. As I listened to the Gospel that evening the words took on new meaning for me. Peter too at first refused to allow Jesus to wash his feet. Jesus replied, "Unless you allow me to wash your feet you will have no inheritance with me." In my head I translated that: unless you allow me to love you, unless you allow me to wash away your sins you will not share eternal life with me. This gift of salvation must become personal for each of us. Jesus is pouring out His life for us. We must accept the gift. In his Catechism Saint John Chrysostom writes: "The soldier pierced the Lord's side, he breached the wall of the sacred temple, and I have found a treasure, and I have made that treasure my own." Each one of us must make that treasure our own. The Cross must become personal.

My second significant spiritual awakening occurred while I was in seminary. As we were studying the Gospel of John and covering the famous passage John 3:16, the professor was making a case that the word *gave* should be translated *gives*, *i.e.*, "God so loved the world that He *gives* His only begotten Son." He argued that the verb was active and not past tense. He also argued that the gift of God's life and love is an ongoing, every present and never-ending reality. He pointed to the Eucharist where we make present again the one sacrifice of Calvary, where His body is given up and His blood poured out. Then he pointed to all the sacraments of the Church where God's grace and mercy flow upon us.

As my personal relationship with Jesus has evolved over the years so has my vision and experience of the crucifixion. It has moved from a distant historical event to an up-close and personal gift of love. It has moved from an intellectual understanding to a personal experience of God's love. For that I am eternally grateful.

