

2021 - 4TH SUNDAY OF LENT, MARCH 13 & 14

DEAD IN TRANSGRESSION BUT SAVED BY THE MERCY OF GOD

Dear brothers and sisters,

The story of the sin, captivity and liberation of the people of Israel, told in the first reading, is a mirror of the story of all humanity. "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). But the Lord did not abandon us to the powers of death. He came to our rescue. He sent his only begotten Son. The Scripture beautifully sums this up, "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" (John 3:16). Cyrus, king of Persia through whom God liberated the Israelites from the Babylonian captivity, is a prototype (or an image of Christ). Bringing man back from the self-inflicted exile cost the Son of God something. He gave his life on the cross for it. You might notice that our Lenten liturgical readings are gradually leading up to Good Friday and then Easter.

Last Sunday's gospel presents our Lord's declaration, "Destroy this temple and in three days, I will build it up" (John 2:21). The temple refers to his body. This Sunday's gospel rings a similar note of the lifting up of the Lord on the cross." 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" (John 3:14). Our Lord revealed this in conversation with Nicodemus, who had asked, "How can a person once grown old be born again" (John 3:4). The birth our Lord was speaking of was not biological. It was supernatural. This is the rebirth that originated from his death on the cross. "God, who is rich in mercy because of the great love he had for us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, brought us to life with Christ (by grace you have been saved)" (Ephesians 2:4-5).

Our Lord likened his coming crucifixion, for the redemption of humanity, to the lifting up of the bronze serpent, which restored to life anyone who gazed on it, after being bitten by the venomous desert serpent. The story of this event is told in detail in Numbers 21:4-9. On the journey to the Promised Land and at a place called mount Hor, the patience of the Israelites wore out. They threatened to return to Egypt, the land where they had been enslaved. Their sin of rebellion had brought on them the biting of the saraph serpent. This is always the order of things. When man rebels against God, chaos and disorder follow in its wake. Nature revolts against man who revolts against God. This is tellingly presented in the first reading from 2 Chronicles 36:14-16, 19-23. "All the princes of Judah, the priests, and the people added treachery to treachery, practicing all the abominations of the nations and defiling the LORD's house which he had consecrated in Jerusalem" (2 Chronicles 36:14). As a result of this, they were invaded, conquered and taken into exile to Babylon, a foreign land where they suffered excruciating oppression. In his mercy, God sent them Cyrus, King of Persia, who liberated them from the Babylonian captivity. This foreshadowed the redemption of the whole of creation by Christ Jesus through his death and resurrection.

The lifting up of the Son of Man on the cross shows both the horror of sin and the greatness of God's love. This revealed that Jesus is God. Our Lord put this clearly, "When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I AM, and that I do nothing on my own, but I say only what the Father taught me" (John 8:28, 12:32).

At the point when the crucified Lord gave a loud cry and breathed his last, the temple veil was torn in two from top to bottom and the earth trembled, "The centurion and the men with him who were keeping watch over Jesus feared greatly when they saw the earthquake and all that was happening, and they said, "Truly, this was the Son of God!" (Matthew 27:54).

What is the message we need to take to heart? It is to live the truth and never prefer darkness to light. How can we live the truth? It is to put our trust in him who was lifted up on the cross for us. Our Lord said, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst" (John 6:35). Let us conclude with the prayer to the Merciful Lord.

"You expired, Jesus, but the source of life gushed forth for souls, and the ocean of mercy opened up for the whole world. O Fount of Life, unfathomable Divine Mercy, envelope the whole world and empty Yourself out upon us." Amen.