

THE EXALTATION OF THE HOLY CROSS

14th September

The gospel reading looks for faith from the follower of Jesus and recalls the image given in the first reading where Moses 'fashioned a bronze serpent' and anyone who 'looked at the bronze serpent' lived. It is through our belief in the power of the Cross that we will live. In the second reading we have the powerful hymn about Christ's humility which led him 'even to accepting death, death on a cross' but the Father has truly rewarded him.

The **First Reading** is from the book of Numbers the fourth book of the Jewish Law. This book resumes the account of the desert journey from Mt Sinai. A census of the people is taken, ch.1-4, followed by an offering of gifts on the occasion of the dedication of Yahweh's Dwelling, then the second Passover is celebrated and the Israelites leave the holy mountain, ch.9-10. The people reach Kadesh and from here an unsuccessful attempt is made to enter Canaan from the south. There follows a prolonged stay at Kadesh after which the Israelites make their way to the plains of Moab opposite Jericho, ch.20-25. The Midianites are defeated and the tribes of Gad and Reuben settle in Transjordan, ch.31-32. Interspersed between the narrative sections are groups of laws either supplementing the Sinaitic code or preparing for the colonisation of Canaan.

The reading, 21.4-9, is during the journeying from Kadesh to Moab. Once again the people lose trust in God and Moses and go to Moses and complain. As punishment God sent fiery (winged) serpents among them, 'their bite brought death to many in Israel.' Again the people plead with Moses to intercede for them and God tells Moses to 'make a fiery serpent and raise it as a standard.' This story is to be associated with copper mines of the Arabah (between the Gulf of Aqaba and the Dead Sea) where the metal was already being exploited. A number of small copper snakes have been discovered presumably, used like that in our reading, to ward off poisonous snakes. The people who looked on the snake Moses fashioned were saved.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 77.1-2,34-38, is from a psalm which teaches about the history of Israel, the sins of the nation and their punishment. So the opening verse pleads with the people to heed God's word and learn from past mistakes. Although God dealt out punishment yet would he return and they would realise 'God was their rock.' But the words the people spoke were lies and flattery their hearts were not with God or his Covenant. But God is a God of compassion, a forgiving God who held back from the punishments they deserved.

The **Second Reading** is from Paul's letter to the Philippians. Philippi, one of the principal cities of Macedonia, had been evangelised by Paul in 50 A.D. on his second missionary journey. Paul is now on his third missionary journey and is imprisoned in Ephesus, the capital of Roman Asia. He hopes to revisit the Church at Philippi and does so in the autumn of 57 and at Passover 58. The letter is almost heart rending showing Paul's love for the Church and in his desire to see them, he writes a friendly letter, giving some news to his converts there. He warns them to 'Beware of evil workmen!' who will destroy the unity of love and joy which he so much desires for them based on humility, the humility of Christ and to that end he sends the Philippians a poem on the humility of Christ Jesus, 2.6-11.

The reading, 2.6-11, comes from the section where Paul is teaching about the preservation of unity in humility. Read if you have time from the beginning of chapter two. The words immediately preceding the reading: 'In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus' give the reader the thought that should be in mind as the reading is proclaimed. The first verse may be seen as a contrast with Adam who was created in the image of God but sought to be like God, Jesus humbled himself. He takes on the form of a slave. Christ did not despise his humanity but was prepared to suffer death on a cross. God has raised him from this death to life in heaven and has given Jesus a name, the divine name, Lord, so that every being in heaven, on earth and in the underworld should, on bended knee and with the tongue, acclaim 'Jesus as Lord.' This is the essence of the creed we say each Sunday at Mass and in so doing we give glory to the Father. We must remember all this depended on Jesus' humility, emptying self and assuming the condition of a slave. The thoughts expressed in this reading give us a deeper understanding of the words in the gospel reading.