

Thursday 14th September 2017

Holy Cross Day

Red



Collect

Almighty God, who in the passion of your blessed Son made an instrument of painful death to be for us the means of life and peace: grant us so to glory in the cross of Christ that we may gladly suffer for his sake; who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen**

Numbers 21:4-9 English Standard Version (ESV)

The Bronze Serpent

21 ⁴From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. ⁵And the people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.” ⁶Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. ⁷And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” ⁹So Moses made a bronze^[a] serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

Footnote: a. or *copper*.

COMMENT: The name of the book in English derives from the Greek title ‘Arithmoi’ and arises from several passages referring to the numbers counted in a census of Israel. The Hebrew name is ‘bemidbar’ meaning ‘in the wilderness.’ The whole book tells of Moses’ leadership of the Israelites during their time in the wilderness under the LORD’s direction. While exhibiting this thematic unity, the text also reveals some evidence of various sources. Primarily, the final edit appears to come from the Priestly compilers of the post-exilic text whose main purpose was to give identity to the LORD’s covenant people, Israel. The value of

Numbers lies in the way it tells the descendants of the ancient Israelites who they are from a theological point of view. The incident recorded in this reading was intended to reinforce the idea that the LORD alone, not an object of superstition, was guiding the Israelites toward the Promised Land. Despite being bitten by poisonous snakes, reputedly sent by the LORD as a punishment for rejecting the LORD's direction through Moses (verses 6-7), the story has a theological meaning that the LORD protects the Israelites from harm. The erection of the bronzed serpent seems very unusual in the light of the second commandment forbidding images of any kind (cf. Exodus 20:4-6). Yet the Israelite's were required only to look at it, and not worship it. Quite obviously, the symbol remained significant for the Jewish faith tradition for many centuries afterward because John 3:14 quotes Jesus as referring to it. The bronzed serpent on a pole remains a symbol of healing for the medical profession.

John 3:13-17 English Standard Version (ESV)

Son of Man must be lifted up

3¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.^[a] 14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.^[b]

For God So Loved the World

16 "For God so loved the world,^[c] that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Footnotes: a. Some manuscripts add *who is in heaven*. b. Some interpreters hold that the quotation ends at verse 15. c. Or *For this is how God loved the world*.

COMMENT: John records these words spoken by Jesus during his secret meeting with a leading Pharisee, Nicodemus. It is difficult to challenge this traditional view yet according to some scholars, we might have here John's own analysis of what the coming of the Son of God really means – yet on the other hand, it is not inconceivable that Nicodemus related the interview to members of the early Church. Apparently a very wealthy man as well as a member of the supreme court of Israel, the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus later participated in Jesus' burial by bringing a great supply of spices to prevent the body from causing offensive odors while it decayed. Thus, like all the rest of the disciples, he did not believe in or anticipate the resurrection. As a Pharisee, nonetheless, he would have believed in resurrection as a messianic event. Again, this points to John's theme that Jesus came to bring us life, as the sacrificial Lamb of God (John 1:29). The context of today's reading proclaims that faith in Jesus Christ, the one who was crucified, brings new life. It begins here and now, in this world; but it is also eternal, extending to life with God beyond death. The reference to Moses lifting

up the serpent in the wilderness (re Num. 21:4-9) symbolised the healing that faith brings. The new birth of John 3:3-8 is a spiritual re-creation initiated by the Spirit. This takes us back to the opening verses of Genesis. John 3:16 also reiterates the reality of the new spiritual life to be received through faith in what God has done in Jesus Christ.

Psalm 22:24-32 (*Greek verse numbering*)

℟ You Lord are my praise in the great assembly.

²⁴ “You who fear the Lord give him praise;
all sons of Jacob, give him glory.
Revere him, Israel's sons. ℟

²⁵ For he has never despised
nor scorned the poverty of the poor.
From him he has not hidden his face,
but he heard the poor man when he cried.” ℟

²⁶ You are my praise in the great assembly.
My vows I will pay before those who fear him.
²⁷ The poor shall eat and shall have their fill.
They shall praise the Lord, those who seek him.
May their hearts live for ever and ever! ℟

²⁸ All the earth shall remember and return to the Lord,
all families of the nations worship before him;
²⁹ for the kingdom is the Lord's, he is ruler of the nations. ℟

³⁰ They shall worship him, all the mighty of the earth;
before him shall bow all who go down to the dust. ℟

And my soul shall live for him, ³¹ my children serve him.
They shall tell of the Lord to generations yet to come,
³² declare his faithfulness to peoples yet unborn:
“These things the Lord has done.” ℟

**Glory be to the Father, and to the Son:
and to the Holy Spirit**

**As it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be:
world without end. Amen.**

COMMENT: There is a possibility that this part of the psalm is actually a separate hymn of praise and thanksgiving unrelated to the lament of the first part. It may also have served as a liturgy for anyone who came to give thanks for deliverance from affliction. The first few verses of this reading presents some insight into the common practices surrounding a thank offering in the temple. Rejoicing in deliverance from distress, the worshipper invites the gathered congregation to join him in praise as he offers his sacrifice. The invitation includes sharing in a feast, or at least the eating of a portion of the sacrifice, possibly meat, sweet cakes or fruit. It may only have been a token and symbolic meal such as we share in the celebration of Holy Communion. The psalmist, however, has a more universal understanding of what happens. Not only is this act of worship and praise to the LORD shared by those in attendance at the time. It is for all people and for all time because the LORD is sovereign over all (verses 27-28). And not only the living, but the dead will join in the worship (verse 29) and so also shall the unborn (verses 30-31). The psalm as a whole reflects the lament for the terrible tragedy of the Babylonian exile and the hopeful universalism of Second Isaiah. Like the various New Testament descriptions of the Passion of Christ and the theological insights of the Epistles, verses 1-22 speak of hate-filled hostility and horrible suffering. Yet verses 23-31 bring out the triumphant note of thanksgiving and praise for deliverance from affliction efficacious for all people of faith. It is highly probable that this psalm typified for the early Church what Jesus has done for us. Hence the quotations from verses 7, 8 and 18 in the Passion story in all four Gospels and the underlying motif of Paul's Christology.

Post Communion

Faithful God, whose Son bore our sins in his body on the tree and gave us this sacrament to show forth his death until he comes: give us grace to glory in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, for he is our salvation, our life and our hope, who reigns as Lord, now and for ever. **Amen**

The Blessing

Christ crucified draw you to himself, to find in him a sure ground for faith, a firm support for hope, and the assurance of sins forgiven; and the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be among you, and remain with you always. **Amen.**