The Exaltation of the Holy Cross

The lifting up of Jesus that John just spoke of in this Gospel? Like the desert of our 1st reading, it took place in a desolate spot. It was outside the walls of Jerusalem, an abandoned rock quarry. An outcropping of flawed rock had been left by the quarrymen. Apparently it looked a bit like a skull. Desolate as the place was, after the crucifixion, Christians went there to pray and celebrate the resurrection. The empty tomb was nearby.

In 135, the Emperor Hadrian had the quarry filled in, to create a level platform on which to erect a temple to the Roman gods. But many believers continued to remember that holy place, where they had gone to pray.

In 327, St Helena made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land to find the various important locations in Jesus’ life. Based on local memories, she had the Roman temple torn down, and the area excavated. The cross on which Christ was crucified was found beneath the fill. Our feast today celebrates that finding of the cross.

St. Helena’s son Constantine built a Basilica on the site, and this feast also celebrates the anniversary of the dedication of that Basilica. A few hundred years later the Persians conquered Jerusalem, and carried off the cross. Fifteen years later Emperor Heraclius II was able to regain the cross and return it to Jerusalem. When this feast was established, that two was being commemorated. So this feast commemorates the finding of the Cross, the anniversary of the dedication of the Basilica over the site of the crucifixion and the resurrection, and the return of the Cross to Jerusalem, after it had been looted by the Persians.
A trip to the site today can be very confusing. Not only were the city walls expanded, so that now the formerly desolate rock quarry is inside the city walls; the site is incongruously in the over-crowded, building packed Christian Quarter. You have to go into Holy Sepulchre Church and climb up narrow stairs to get to the site of Golgotha. Once you reach the spot, your senses are flooded with the glint of silver, polished marble, the aroma of candles and incense, crowds. The place on which the cross stood is under an ornate altar, in an icon-filled chapel inside the Basilica. I suppose there is something to be said about the fact that you have to kneel down on hands and knees to reach in and touch the actual sacred spot. For more on approaching with humility, check out bulletin for the story of Heraclius returning the cross!

St. Paul with his hymn to Christ in our second reading can get us back on message. He understood the significance of the cross, he preached the cross, Christ crucified, and lived the message.

The Roman Empire at the time of Jesus, and the time of St. Paul was all about power and glory through domination, and subjugating other peoples. Wealth was practically worshipped, with resources flowing from the provinces to Rome, the Emperor, the Senate, and a few wealthy families. Those who were entrusted by the Romans with administration in Jerusalem, namely Sadducees, Scribes and some influential Pharisees allowed that value system to rub off on them, a big reason they were uncomfortable with Jesus and his teaching. Search and search for a place where Jesus says ‘Blessed are the high and mighty, and those with others under their thumb; it will be even better for them in heaven’ -- it just isn’t there. Instead, we have an ancient hymn to Christ in this second
speaking of his humbling himself, emptying himself, and taking the form, not of a ruler, but of a slave.

With our focus on learning this Fall, here is a new word we can learn today: **Kenosis**. The concept is more important than the word. Believe it or not, Wikipedia does a great job with both: “In Christian theology, *kenosis* (from the Greek word for emptiness κένωσις, kénōsis) is the 'self-emptying' of one's own will and becoming entirely receptive to God's divine will.” That is clear, but a bit abstract. Let me do a visual. See this glass? It is full of water. If I try pouring water from this picture into the glass, it runs all over, and very little gets into the glass. But empty the glass first, and filling it from the pitcher works perfectly. Until we empty ourselves, there isn’t really room inside for the Lord to dwell. In fact, here isn’t even very much room for the people who are part of our life. Love requires having space in our life for the other. You’ve heard the expression ‘full of himself or herself’? It is not just an issue for a few people, it is part of the human condition. Faith requires not just a conversion in our thinking. It entails a move from being filled with ourselves, to emptying out a space for God, and for others. It takes prayer, sacrifice and discipline; real effort to empty ourselves, if we want to truly be filled with God’s grace, God’s love, forgiveness, and God’s will.

Here is one of the things we learn in the Christian journey. In the history of the church, many great saints have left the world behind, embraced a monastic way of life, struggled with their demons, emptied themselves and truly become holy. We can read in their writings about the way of renunciation, the via negative, the way of self-emptying. There are those on that path today as well. But not all are called to leave the world in that way.
St. Francis DeSales, St. Theresa of the Little Flower and others have pointed out that there are ways we can still live in the world, yet empty ourselves in our ordinary, daily life, becoming holy. There are many contemporary spiritual books out there with practical way of emptying oneself and letting go.

The Sacrament of marriage, when embraced, can be a journey of emptying oneself to make room inside for one’s partner, for two becoming one, and as that happens, space can open up as well for the Lord to be part of the Marriage: another way of holiness.

And that isn’t all --- many people, many, many of us may think we gasp the message, and think we are emptying ourselves, but it can actually be pride with a different face. It is possible to try to live the paschal mystery, offering ourselves and our will to the Father, together with Jesus in the Eucharist, yet not be totally transformed. You see it is a journey. There are ever deeper parts of us that need to be brought to the cross.

One way that often reaches to the deeper levels: a tragedy comes along. Things are taken away from us, not freely given away. Whether the loss comes through the death of a loved one, illness, losing a job, losing a friend; something valuable is taken away, and a hole is created. I don’t believe God inflicts tragedy in order to get our attention, but God certainly makes the effort to get our attention when tragedy does come. God can take whatever hardship comes through our human condition and the brokenness of the world, and visit us in the empty space that is opened up. Whether the space is opened up through our own efforts, our state in life, or simply because things happen in this broken world, an
emptiness in side holds great spiritual potential. No life can totally escape suffering. Sometimes, not always, but sometimes, by God’s grace, our greatest spiritual growth can come when we find ourselves empty, realize it is an emptiness only God can reach, and in the searching and the longing, we connect with God’s amazing love. Never underestimate what grace God can bring out of suffering.

Just look at the cross. That is what St. Paul did, and he found there wisdom that transformed his life, and led him to change the world for the better. We still are learning from him today. That is what St. John did, look at the cross, and it led him to be grasped by the tremendous love and mercy he describes in the beautiful passage we just heard in the Gospel today. That is what the church invites us all to do on this Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross. (concluded with the song by John Foley, Take Lord, Receive, sung)

Take, Lord, receive all my liberty,
My memory, understanding, my entire will.

refrain: Give me only Your love and Your grace, that's enough for me. Your love and Your grace, are enough for me.

Take, Lord, receive all I have and possess.
You have given all to me, now I return it.

Take, Lord, receive, all is Yours now.
Dispose of it, wholly according to Your will.

(based on Suscipe prayer of St. Ignatius of Lyola)