

**The Serpent on the Pole**  
**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent**  
**(Jn 3:14-21; Eph 2:4-10)**

John 3:16 is one of the most famous verses of the Bible: *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him might not die, but have eternal life.”* It is a beautiful verse that speaks of salvation, and explains the reason why God became man in the Incarnation: *“God sent His Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.”* This is echoed in the Creed: *“For us men and our salvation he came down from heaven...”*

God does not desire man’s condemnation. Instead, the coming of God’s Son is to pay the price of sin, to *“show the immeasurable riches of His grace in His kindness to us in Christ Jesus”* (Eph 2:7).

But even though God did not send His Son to condemn the world, many are condemned through the Son, not because God is not *“rich in mercy”* (Eph 2:4), but because they refuse to acknowledge their sins and repent, remaining instead in darkness (Jn 3:19-20). God has won salvation for man in Christ, but salvation is not automatic applied. One thing more is necessary, and this is repentance. God does not “force” salvation on man, it must be accepted, and this is the role of *faith*.

St. John explains that the one who “believes in him” will not perish but have eternal life. This faith in Christ involves “work” (cf. Jn 6:29), and the work is repentance from sin, living in grace, living in the light in such a way that one’s *“deeds may be clearly seen as done in God”* (Jn 3:21).

Salvation is therefore not easy or to be taken for granted. On God’s part it involves the incredible work of Christ’s Passion and death. On man’s part it involves the ongoing spiritual work of faith which is repentance.

Jesus illustrates the meaning of salvation by calling to mind an incident in the time of Moses: *“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 3:14-15). The serpent in the desert prefigures Christ on the Cross. It is through the Cross that God accomplishes the world’s salvation, it is through the Cross that man attains the grace of repentance and eternal life.

When God delivered Israel out of Egypt through the Red Sea, He brought them into the desert for forty years, during which time he trained and formed the people to be a holy nation governed by His law. God provided food and water as needed (manna, quail, water from the rock), and established the covenant of the Ten Commandments through Moses at Mt. Sinai.

But life in the desert – and God’s demands – were not easy, so the people rebelled. They grumbled and complained, cursing the “wretched food” of the manna. They rejected God and Moses, and intended to return to Egypt. This rebellion was like the disobedience of Adam all over again. God therefore sent “fiery serpents” to bite them, resulting in many deaths (Nm 21:6).

The people, realizing their sin, asked Moses to intercede with God. For their healing, God did something strange and unique. He ordered Moses to make a serpent out of bronze and mount it on a pole before the people, so that “*seeing it, they shall live*” (Nm 21:8). By looking upon the serpent on the pole, the people were able to recognize and accept their sinfulness. They were being confronted with their sin, and moved to true repentance. Only by acknowledging their sin in this way, could they be healed.

Jesus explains his own Passion – and the world’s salvation – by means of this incident: “*Just as Moses lifted up the serpent [on a pole] in the desert, [so that everyone who looked upon it may live,] so must the Son of Man be lifted up [on the Cross], so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.*” This “looking upon” Jesus on the Cross is faith. In John’s Gospel, faith is sight, “seeing is believing,” and “believing is seeing” (cf. Jn 9:35-41; 20:29). To look upon the Son lifted on the Cross, is to understand the reality and price of sin. St. Thomas the Apostle has this profound experience of faith in Christ when he is able to touch the wounds of the Passion (Jn 20:24-29). Grace and Mercy, Salvation, flow from the Cross, because the Cross kindles repentance. Without the Passion, the “serpent on the pole,” we are not yet fully confronted with the gravity of sin.

Several years ago Mel Gibson directed the movie *The Passion of the Christ*. Many were critical of the movie because of its violence and the gruesome ugliness that was depicted. The Passion of Christ is ugly. Sin is ugly. This movie sought to confront the world with its sin, so as to provide it the opportunity of faith and repentance. It sought to accomplish in its medium, what the Church elsewhere seeks to accomplish through the devotional medium of the crucifix. Whether through film, devotional crucifix, forensic analysis of the Shroud of Turin, Stations of the Cross, Palm Sunday recitation of the Passion, Good Friday veneration of the Cross, or Old Testament bronze serpent on a pole, man must be confronted by his sin. This is the fundamental purpose of each of the four Gospels, which is why they devote such a large proportion of their chapters to the Passion. Man must recognize the price of sin, and through recognition of the Son of God who dies on the Cross, accept the gift of salvation via sincere and humble repentance.

It is the practice of Lent to go to confession. Confession may be called the “Sacrament of the Cross,” because we directly confront our sins in the light of the Cross, and bring our sins into the open to be washed by the Blood of Christ who died on the Cross. The Sacrament of Penance is the only one which is typically celebrated by the Church on Good Friday. This is fundamentally appropriate. At some time during Lent, we should make a good confession of our sins, and deepen the original repentance of Baptism. In this way we increase our faith, and ensure that our deeds are continually exposed to the Light, and that we are living “according to the truth, walking in the light” (cf. 1Jn 1:6-10).