

SERMON NOTES

Sunday, September 16, 2007

FEAST OF THE EXALTATION OF THE HOLY CROSS

Synaxis Gospel
John 3:13-21

INTRODUCTION

Today, we, in the Armenian Church, celebrate the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. It is one of our traditional major feasts. Why do we do this? In the book of Galatians [16:14-18], the Epistle reading for today, St. Paul writes, "But may it never be that I should boast, except in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world." St. Paul had a lot to brag about. He had exalted family connections, he had exalted political connections, and he had an exalted education. His career had soared like a rocket. All this had come to mean nothing to him, he only wanted to exalt in the Cross of Christ. Why?

The answer to both our questions is found in our Gospel reading for today, John chapter 3. Here we find Jesus in serious discussion with one of the leading men of the nation. His name is Nicodemus. Nicodemus was one of the leading teachers in the Jewish religion. He had carefully studied the Old Testament Scriptures, but he was full of questions. He was convinced that Jesus was a teacher sent from God and could answer those questions. BUT, because most of the other men in his position were suspicious and antagonistic toward Jesus, Nicodemus did not want them to find out that he had visited with Jesus. So Nicodemus arranged to meet Jesus at night. The big question Nicodemus had was about the Kingdom of God. He wanted in. But how does one become a citizen of God's Kingdom? That was the big question in the mind of this man, famous for his ability to teach religion. He knew in his heart that his high position in his religion did not get him through the door of the kingdom. He had been through all the ceremonies, faithfully kept all the traditions, yet Nicodemus knew he was not in. He was not in the kingdom of God. He was disparate, so he went to see Jesus, by night.

Jesus, to Whom all hearts are an open book, skipped the pleasantries and went straight to the question. How does one enter God's kingdom? It is a matter of birth. There are two kinds of births. One is physical, from the watery confines of the mother's womb. The other is spiritual, the mysterious invisible product of the Holy Spirit of God. [The kingdom's citizens are not simply spiritual beings or simply members of the human race; they must be both, as is their King.] Nicodemus still did not understand the process and Jesus takes a moment to let him know that even though the powerful group, of which Nicodemus was a member, did not believe Jesus' message, Nicodemus had indeed come to the right Person.

SYNTAXIS READING

John 3:13-21

And no one has ascended into Heaven, .but He Who descended from Heaven, *Even*, the Son of Man.

Since no one can travel to Heaven, the only Person that can answer questions concerning the Kingdom is the King from Heaven. This statement is an allusion to the Old Testament vision in the book of Daniel.

[Dan.7:13-14] In the vision, Daniel sees a ceremony before the throne of God in Heaven. He sees "One like a Son of Man" being made the King of the Kingdom. This title, Son of Man, alluding to the vision, was the title Jesus most often used for Himself. Everyone who heard Him do that understood exactly that He was claiming to be the King of Daniel's vision. Other titles that mean 'The King' are 'The Christ' and 'The Messiah'.

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,

Jesus will now answer the 'how' question. How does one get the second birth required for citizenship in the Kingdom? Jesus illustrates the answer with an Old Testament story that Nicodemus would know very well.¹ 1400 years earlier, as Moses was leading the Jews' ancestors through the desert to the Promised Land, they became rebellious, ungrateful, and disobedient. God punished them by sending deadly serpents that bit them. However, God also provided a cure: belief and obedience. He instructed Moses to make and place a brazen serpent on a pole and lift it up so that the people could see it. He then told Moses to command the people to look toward that lifted up figure of the serpent.² If they trusted God's word and obeyed they would recover from the snake bites. If they did not obey, they died.

¹ Numbers 21:5-9

² The Israelites kept the Brazen Serpent probably as a reminder of their sin and God's provision in their time of disparate need. Hundreds of years later, idolatry had crept into the pure religion. The people were worshipping many idols, including the Brazen Serpent. A godly king destroyed the Brazen Serpent along with the other idols. [2 Kings 18:4] As for us, we always stress that it was Christ Who saved us by His death. The Cross represents that powerful fact for us. We call it 'Holy' because it was used in that holy purpose; but it is Christ we worship.

Even so must the Son of Man be lifted up,

THE FACT: He would be crucified: lifted up on the Cross. From the days of Adam and Eve until today the penalty for the sin of disobedience, because of disbelief in the truth of God's statements, has always been spiritual death. But God has provided a cure: Christ's death for us on the Cross.

That whosoever believes may in Him have eternal life.

THE PURPOSE: For all who believe that God has made this provision; believe that God has told us the truth about this matter. To all who believe this, God promises eternal life. Eternal Life is equivalent to the spiritual birth required to be a citizen of the Kingdom.

For God so loved the world,

THE REASON: The reason God took this action and made this sin curing provision was because He deeply loves all mankind.

That He gave His only-begotten Son

For the purpose of the cure, Jesus Christ was sent to be lifted up on the Cross.

Nicodemus and the Jews of Jesus' day would have understood the title, 'Son of God' as referring to a kingly ruler - someone ruling as God's vicar on Earth. God named Adam as the first ruler of the earth. In recognition of that fact, Luke 3:38 entitles Adam 'The Son of God.' Psalm 2, was read with hope at the coronation of each new king of Judah beginning with Solomon³. It pictures the new king as reigning with all the glory and power of God over all peoples. All of their kings fell short of that hope, but the Jews knew that one day a King would arise that would fulfill the Psalm.⁴

The term 'only-begotten' has its roots in Psalm 2 as well. Concerning the new King, God is quoted as

³ Actually, Solomon, King David's son was the last king to reign over the undivided kingdom which was later split into the kingdoms of Judah and Israel.

⁴ For a discussion of the place of Psalm 2 in the life of Israel see Leopold Sabourin, *The Psalms, Their Origin and Meaning*, (New York: Alba House, 1974) pp.338-42.

proclaiming: "You are My Son, Today I have begotten You." So the 'begotten son' metaphor was used of all the kings. However the term, "only-begotten Son" speaks of a King that was unique from all the rest. Today we know that Jesus was the unique Son of God because He is God incarnated. Therefore, in Jesus Christ, Psalm 2 is fully fulfilled.

That whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.

Such a one must believe that Jesus Christ is God's provision against the death sentence for our sins that we would face without Him. This is not simply an intellectual assent. Even the demons "believe that God is One and shudder." Our belief must be one of trust in Him, as a child totally trusts its father.

For God sent not His Son into the world to judge the world,

When Christ returns to the Earth, He will judge the world. But at the first advent He had a different purpose, salvation.

But that the world should be saved through Him.

God's salvation purpose, the opportunity He graciously extends to all members - past, present and future - of the human race, rested on the shoulders of the King, Jesus Christ. He died for each and every one of us.

He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe is judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

Believing is the key to appropriating God's offer. Just as in the story of Moses and the serpents, we, too, must believe that God has truly provided a cure for the certain death we face; and acting on that belief in trust will deliver us. On the other hand, disbelief leaves us in the position of condemnation resulting in certain spiritual death.

The term 'name' in the Bible refers to more than simply a name, it refers even more to the character of the one who has the name - to who that person really is. So here, 'name of the only begotten Son of God' does not refer simply to the name 'Jesus' but to the character of Jesus, who Jesus really is: the unique

Son of God, the King who is the loving and truthful incarnate God.

And this is the judgment, that the Light is come into the world,
What distinguishes the judged from those who escape judgment is their reaction to Jesus Christ, the Light of the world.⁵ (Light is descriptive of God because without it there is no life and because in the presence of light, truth is revealed. Jesus said, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life."⁶)

And men loved the darkness rather than the Light for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light, lest his deeds should be exposed.

People who want to cling to, or even deny the fact of their sinful ways try to hide from Jesus Christ. In His Holy Presence their sins are fully and shamefully exposed.

But he, who practices the truth, comes to the Light, that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.

One who believes and trusts God and obeys the commandments of God, loves the Light and its revelation. In His bright Presence it will be known that their good deeds were actually the results of God's power working in and through them.⁷ The fact that their works are actually God's works proves that they are citizens of God's Kingdom.⁸

APPLICATION

Nicodemus was one of the most religious men of his day; he was even called *the* teacher of Israel. Yet he knew deep within his soul that his relationship with God was not right. Many people are able to teach others or recite creeds but they still do not in their heart of hearts believe that what God has promised He will faithfully carry out. If we only believe, as the demons do, that God exists, we will only be terrified to face Him, just as the demons are. This is not what God wants from us. What God requires of us is to believe Him, to believe that all that He says is *true*. He wants us to believe that He loves us and He wants us to trust

⁵ For this concept see also John 1:4-9; 8:12; 9:5; 12:46

⁶ John 14:6

⁷ "For it is God Who is at work within you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure" Philippians. 2:13.

⁸ Ephesians 2:4-10

Him. He is not out to get us, on the contrary He is out to save us and restore us to Himself.

Nicodemus knew the promises of God from his study of the Old Testament. Those promises were being fulfilled as they spoke. Jesus is the promised King, the unique Son of God who brought salvation to all who trust in the truth of God's word. Within a short time of their conversation, Jesus, God in human flesh, paid the sin penalty for us all; all we need do is trustingly believe that He did. Nicodemus wanted to know how he could be born spiritually. Jesus gave him the answer: believe in Him; look only to Him for salvation. That is the answer he gives us as well.

The last information we have about Nicodemus is recorded in John 19:38-42. Despite the fact that their actions would mean certain loss of their powerful positions and even excommunication from their people, Nicodemus and another secret disciple allowed their devotion to Jesus to be openly known. After the crucifixion, they went to the Romans and requested from them the body of Jesus which they lovingly buried. Later, Paul, like Nicodemus, gave up everything for the love of the Christ who died for him.

Since this great salvation was accomplished on the Cross, it has become the symbol of God's completed work for us as well as for St. Paul. The Armenian Cross is empty; Christ's figure is not depicted on it. Thus, for us the Cross symbolizes the entire salvation event from the Crucifixion to the Resurrection. We know that the One who loves us, our living Savior, reigns today in Heaven as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. This knowledge calls for deep thanksgiving and great rejoicing. We, like St. Paul, find our source of highest exaltation in the great salvation event that the Holy Cross of Christ so perfectly symbolizes. Let the feasting begin! May it continue in our hearts forevermore!