

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on Holy Cross Day
September 14, 2014

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In the ancient history of salvation there is a strange incident about the serpent Moses lifted up on a pole in the wilderness. All who had sinned and been bitten by a serpent looked upon the mounted bronze serpent and were saved. We would not make anything of this strange story except that God Incarnate did. He reminded Nicodemus that so, in this same way, the son of Man must be lifted up, and that all who look upon Him on the Cross will have eternal life.

That is the beginning of the special relationship between normal, everyday, Christians and the invention of torture and death that was the Cross. Moses was given a serpent to hold up, so that people bitten by serpents could gaze upon the cause of their misery and be saved from it. Christ Jesus was lifted up on the Cross so that all who look upon Him *there* (not primarily on his teaching, but upon His *death* for the sins of the world) would be saved from death, the very consequence of sin. The brass serpent held up by Moses reminded the people in the Sinai wilderness of their sins. They had rebelled against God Who then had sent serpents to torment them. On Good Friday, and *whenever* we gaze upon Christ on the Cross, we look at Him there and see what God took *on Himself* for our sins. When we are convicted of our sins, and that these sins put Christ on the Cross for love of us, all this draws us to Himself.

Once upon a time crucifixion was something commonplace, to be seen on execution hill outside every town in the Roman Empire. No wonder when crosses disappeared as a hated and feared punishment for capital offence, Christians sought to remember, in painting, sculpture, in work of wood and iron, The Holy Cross of Christ, a symbol not of death but of *life*.

September 14th in medieval days was called Rood Mass Day. It was a religious festival. Each town took pride in its parish church. The focus of the pride was often in the rood, a crucifixion group mounted on the rood beam or cross beam high in the rafters and usually in the place over the transition from nave to choir. The people held parish fairs, brewed ales, sold baked goods, mounted mystery plays, and left money in their wills to the fund set up for the commissioning of great and colorfully painted and gilded roods with their screens and tracery. Christians had learned to “glory in the Cross of Christ” as Saint Paul taught the Galatians.

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If in today's crazy, mixed up, world, a "lifetime achievement award" were to be given to Jesus of Nazareth, it is a sure bet the world would get it all wrong. The award would be given because of the Lord's teaching and example. But that is to be wide of the mark. Catholics know that Christ's achievement is His *death on the Cross*. He Himself said, "I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto Me." And when souls have been won by the irresistible attraction of His supreme self-sacrifice, *they gather around His feet*. Why? Christ's act of self-sacrifice proves God's love, guarantees His forgiveness, and draws souls in need of both.

The world taunted Jesus. "Come down from the Cross." That same world's billboards and slick advertisements promise a life without pain or self-denial, calling us into a mindless struggle for wealth and pleasure where the end justifies the means. The Cross preaches the Voice of Jesus calling us *out* of that life to one of self-conquest, the restraint of undisciplined desire, to the faithful exercise of tenderness for the weakness of others, and above all to a stern adherence to principle and a faithful loyalty to truth at whatever cost. The magnet of the world's attractions makes the needle of our moral compass spin all over the dial. *We need the preaching of the Cross.*

So we have this feast day to "glory in the Cross of Christ." The Cross is the outward and visible sign that the One we worship and adore is the One Who was crucified. You and I were solemnly pledged at our baptisms to confess His Name before men. His Cross is always our aid to devotion, a reminder of the love and forgiveness and sacrifice of God, a symbol of our duty, the greatest comfort, and a sign of our hope for the life to come. May the Holy Cross always wake in our hearts a more fervent love and loyalty to Our Lord Jesus Christ.