

## PREGO PLUS: BACKGROUND NOTES

### THE EXALTATION OF THE HOLY CROSS



**The Exaltation of the Holy Cross**, observed annually on 14 September, marks two historical events: the discovery of the True Cross in Jerusalem in 320 by Saint Helena, mother of the Emperor Constantine, and Constantine's dedication of the basilica he built on the site of the crucifixion in 335. More importantly, the feast also celebrates the saving death and resurrection of Jesus through the cross, summed up in the Entrance Antiphon: *'We should glory in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whom is our salvation, life and resurrection, through whom we are saved and delivered'*.

In today's Gospel we hear about Jesus bringing salvation by being lifted up or exalted (prefigured by Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness in the First Reading), while St Paul also tells how God 'highly exalts' Jesus (Second Reading).

#### Second Reading Philippians 2: 6–11

Philippi was an important town in Macedonia that owes its name to Philip II of Macedon. St Paul established the earliest Christian community in Europe here c. 50 AD, during his second missionary journey. Philippi had a large population of Romans and local Greeks, and the names mentioned by Paul suggests that it was predominantly made up of Gentiles.

Paul wrote this letter from prison, perhaps from Rome or Ephesus, where he seems to have been under house arrest. Some argue that the sudden changes in tone and rather disjointed character suggest that it was originally a collection of three different letters rather than a single text.

Paul is aware of divisions within the Philippian community. Just before the verses we read today, he urges people to show humility and put the interests of others before their own. As encouragement, he quotes what is probably an early Christian hymn – by now one of the best known passages in Paul's letters. It consists of two stanzas (verses 6–8 and 9–11), the first showing the mindset of Jesus and what he did for humanity (he emptied and humbled himself); and the second what God did for Jesus (he raised him and gave him the name of Lord). Being humble was not seen as a virtue in Paul's time, when great importance was attached to social and professional status.

## Gospel John 3: 13–17

### Nicodemus meets Jesus

Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews and a teacher, is mentioned only in St John's Gospel. He appears three times, and always at night. This is his only recorded meeting with Jesus, and their liaison under cover of darkness could be indicative of the heavy opposition encountered by Jesus in Jerusalem at the time.

### 'As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness'

From verse 11 onwards, the conversation changes from dialogue to monologue, as Jesus addresses not only Nicodemus but the 'world'. Jesus is alluding to the Old Testament story told in the book of Numbers (21: 4–9).

### 'The Son of Man must be lifted up'

John relates the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus as a parable of Jesus's life and a prediction of his death. The Greek verb 'to lift up' is *hupsoun*, and is used of Jesus in the Scriptures in two senses. It can mean a literal or physical lifting, or an 'exaltation' – being raised up or glorified. In John 8: 28 and 12: 32 the word is used of Jesus being physically lifted up on the cross. In Acts 2: 33, 5: 31 and Philippians 2: 9 (today's Second Reading) it is used with reference to Jesus's ascension into glory.

### 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son ...'

These words can be seen as the very essence of the Gospel. Very important to St John's theology is the conviction that God's love is the dynamic principle for salvation. John prepares Christ's Passion and death by outlining God's divine plan of salvation for the world, whereas the writers of the synoptic gospels prepare us for Jesus's death in a different way, speaking of what will happen in Jerusalem.

### Contrasts and symbols

#### Light and darkness

As noted above, Nicodemus comes to see Jesus at night. In him we can see all seekers, at first in darkness but then emerging into the light (19: 39). This contrast is a favourite theme of St John, first set out in the Prologue to his Gospel (1: 4–5). People who do not know God's love are in darkness; but in Jesus, they find light, faithfulness and love.

#### To condemn and to save

Salvation is offered to us through Jesus because of God's love for us. Condemnation is not the purpose of the Incarnation. We condemn ourselves by turning away from God, choosing to do our own thing, being self-reliant – as, for example, Adam did – and by rejecting his Son.