Spirituality
Pencil Preaching
"Nicodemus" by James Tissot (Wikimedia Commons/Brooklyn Museum)

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“The Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life” (John 3:14).

Nm 21:4b-9; Phil 2:1-6; John 3:13-17

Exaltation of the Cross

The Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross focuses on what photographers call the “decisive moment,” that image in a continuum of images that, if viewed with insight, reveals the whole story. John’s Gospel reserves this crucial revelation for the death of Jesus on the cross, when the eyes of faith suddenly see who he was and what his death has accomplished.

Franco Zeffirelli's 1977 film "Jesus of Nazareth" brilliantly articulates the meaning of this moment in the words of Nicodemus, played by Sir Laurence Olivier, who stands viewing the terrible scene on Calvary and recites Isaiah 53:

But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all (5-6).

After the chaos of Jesus' arrest, trial and condemnation by the Sanhedrin, his torture and crucifixion by the Romans, Nicodemus finally understands what Jesus told him in John 3:13-17, that he is the Messiah, revealed not in triumph but in rejection and suffering to save the world from sin.

The lifting up of the Son of Man is the final sign in John's Gospel that proclaims Jesus as the divine I AM. His death on the cross will fulfill the imagery of the the seraph serpent Moses lifted up in the desert that healed all those bitten when they looked at it. The curse becomes the cure. Jesus becomes sin so that we might become the very grace of God. The sign of the cross is that love defeats death and mercy disarms sin.

The ministry of the church is to be the sign of Jesus' nonviolent witness as the wisdom that brings peace and reconciliation. It is a witness much needed in our world riven by distrust and fear. We pray on this feast for eyes of faith that can see the cross as the promise of peace and the model for us as peacemakers.

The scene from the film with Nicodemus can be viewed at about hour 5, 45 minutes at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yumoqNlaPCE. The six-hour long production, originally presented as a TV series, is still a masterpiece for its nuanced telling of the Gospel story with deep theological accuracy and cinematic skill. It is worth watching.

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