

March 11, 2018 Lifting Up Homily: One of the most recognizable symbols of the medical profession is the image of a serpent wrapped around a staff or pole. This tradition dates back to the time of Hippocrates, the Father of Medicine, who, in turn, was inspired by the Greek mythology of his time. It should be noted that in ancient Greece the serpent was a sign of healing. For us who live in the twenty-first century, it may strike us as odd. Perhaps we are reminded in the well known story of the serpent tempting Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

In the biblical Torah, there is a reference to a serpent in the Book of Numbers that is mounted on a pole. When anyone gazed upon the bronze serpent after offending the Lord he recovered his health.

On no fewer than three occasions in John's gospel is there a reference to the death of Jesus as a "lifting up". In a more literal sense, it means Jesus being physically lifted up from the ground on the cross; on a much deeper level of meaning, it points to Jesus' enthronement. He is lifted up on the cross, where he is the source of saving life for those who believe in Him. We read in today's gospel, "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) The image of the Divine physician extending his power of healing from the cross is powerful indeed.

In his reflections on this gospel reading, the retired Pontiff, Benedict XVI writes, "So far, then, as it lies with the physician he has come to heal the sick. He, who does not observe the orders of the physician, destroys himself". In order to be saved, that is to say, to have one's health restored, one must first acknowledge his sickness.

One could say that the so-called "good thief" who died alongside Jesus on the cross was the first to experience the saving power of Christ. He gazed intently upon the crucified Christ, expressed in his dying words his belief in Him as his personal savior and, as a reward, is promised Paradise.

To have life, we must raise our eyes to the crucified Christ. In John's gospel, the crucifixion is not a stumbling block for believers. It is God's Eternal Word giving himself in love for the world.

A rather disturbing trend has arisen in recent years concerning the removal of crucifixes in public places. Recently, officials of the Belgian Red Cross ordered their employees to remove all crucifixes from their offices. The employees were curtly informed that the Red Cross is now a secular organization. Too many would find the image of Christ on the cross as offensive in our modern world.

At the Catholic University of America, Muslim students filed a lawsuit demanding that the crucifix be removed from all classrooms. They argued that the presence of the crucifix impeded them in their desire to pray.

Georgetown University, a Jesuit University in our nation's capital, removed crucifixes from their offices and classrooms years ago in order to show their sensitivity to those who are not of the faith.

How sad!

The lifting up of Jesus is a sign that challenges all his followers to imitate the love that is clearly on display in his total self-giving for the sake of others.

In Protestant, Evangelical circles, there is a popular hymn that speaks simply, though eloquently, of the mystery of Christ being lifted up on the cross. The title is "Love Lifted Me". The words are worth noting.

"I was sinking deep in sin
far from a peaceful shore.
Very deeply stained within
Sinking to rise no more
But the Master of the sea
heard my despairing cry.
From the waves lifted me,
Now safe am I.
Love lifted me, Love lifted me
When nothing else could help
Love lifted me."

Amen!