

Feast of the Elevation of the Cross

By Bishop George Khodr

Soon is the feast of the Elevation of the Cross. Two incidents wrought it. The first is in the fourth century when Saint Helena, the mother of the Emperor Constantine, found the Savior's cross which was covered with earth and the second incident is when the Emperor Hercules brought that cross back to Jerusalem from the Persians who had taken it from Jerusalem. The Christians find joy in those two incidents and see them as an act of mercy from God towards them. I will not comment on the above because I want to pass on from what is temporal concerning them to what is essential.

I would like to say that the cross without Him who was crucified on it is of no significance. All religions have symbols and use symbolic language to convey their content. It is of no concern for me whether the relic you hold around your neck is really from the real cross of Christ or not. No one can show evidence for that. But your concern as a Christian has to be in the profession that the death of Jesus and his resurrection is the heart of Christianity; and that every ritual or worship service or doctrine is there to point to that Death and Resurrection.

That is our foundation and that is our scope and to that we witness. Historically speaking, no one can dismiss the historicity of the Gospel story. In that sense the veracity of Jesus' death has evidence outside the gospels. The gospels are the journals of those times; three of the four evangelists were eyewitness to what happened and the fourth one researched what those said. You can ignore believing in the crucifixion of Jesus as an act of redemption and salvation, but you cannot but admit that that man from Galilee was arrested, put on trial by the Jews and the Romans and was given over by Pontius Pilate to be nailed on a cross which was lifted on the hill of Golgotha; moreover He was stabbed with a spear in his side to make sure He died and then Pilate gave His body to be buried.

The crucifixion is significant for the faith due to its meanings. Your true faith is based on accepting its meaning. The meaning of the death of Jesus is that He accepted to lift the sin of the world; that he should become sin so who believes in Him will live without sin and so that one can be resurrected daily from the wrath of God and thus he abides in the Divine Favor.

A cross made of two pieces of wood; one is vertical and the other horizontal. The vertical which Christ was laid on signifies that the Lord was "outstretched" from Earth to Heaven and those who love Him are "outstretched" in the same direction. As for the horizontal beam on which His arms were outstretched, that speaks of Jesus' arms embracing the whole universe and gathering it to him always. And because Jesus is always elevated, we called that feast as that of the elevation of the cross. That is quite symbolic, but in reality the 'elevation' of the crucified (Jesus) is for the life of the world.

There are misleading phrases in the Old Testament that must be read in the light of the New Testament. For example the word 'atonement' - which on the outside means that Jesus died in our place - when read with the juridical sense of the word (which is well known in our Penal Code) might make the reader stumble. This has no basis in our belief. It was said in the West during the middle Ages that sin has elicited God's wrath and that wrath cannot be removed unless God removes it by bringing evenness between God's anger and His atonement. Many still hang on to this interpretation, those who desire to put an end to revenge through a ransom as the habit goes in tribal regions. That also has no basis.

We use the word 'redeemer' – translating it from the Greek - meaning 'deliverer' and not in the juridical context described above. Jesus delivers us from the fear of death as it says in the letter to the Hebrew: "And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage." If you overcome the fear of death you dwell in Life". Christianity is founded on the antinomy between life and death; and what is meant here is not only spiritual death and spiritual life, but the antinomy between the death of the body and the resurrection given us on the Last Day.

The only thing Man fears is death. He fears car accidents, sickness and going into coma; and all that is death. And if he cannot face that in a realistic fashion, he is utterly in fear ever. No one is comforted when told that this is "something that has to happen". God is the lord of "what has to happen"; in that, He can put an end to death here and now. How can you be rid of death when it is going to show itself in your body some day? There is no escape from death except through belovedness (being loved). And for you to feel loved, you need to be loved by a god. No one can substitute for God as the source of your life. This was made known by Jesus of Nazareth in a most eloquent fashion in that He brought the life that was in Him into the kingdom of death. He blew up death from the inside; "He trampled death by death" as the paschal hymn goes.

And as Christ was bringing life into the realm of death, He brought in Love with it. And Life is Love. Only through that you can exit nothingness. The voluntary yielding of Jesus to death is an expression of what came in the Bible in John 3: 16: "So much God loved the world that He gave His only Son....."

With that there is no more room for the questions: "Why should God do all that? Why this Divine strategy? Why this Divine stir? Could not God have shown His love in a different way?" God did things that way because His wisdom is in that way. His wisdom is revealed in the incarnation of the Logos so He can be united with Man to explain to him that God has filled the chasm that is between Him and His children. Is there a more eloquent means than that? That God would share with us our world, in a body like ours with its weaknesses, its death and entombment? That a Christian knows that His Christ is his companion in every pain, and that when laid in the coffin, he is not alone, and that there is something in him that the grave cannot destroy. The Christian knows that he is not a slave to the world. He can fall into sin but he can also rise to righteousness because he

carries in himself the power of love; and he can always forgive and taste Joy in the middle of his illness and taste wholeness in the middle of his handicap; he can experience in the Liturgy the fullness of the Kingdom of God and the confidence before God which is not for judgment or condemnation because he has been lifted through the resurrection of the Savior from death to life.

That is what the feast is about.