

Lent 4B (3/22/09 – Christ Lifted Up on the Cross ... to Give LIFE)

In the Name JESUS. [Amen]

The *Old Testament*, *Epistle*, and *Holy Gospel Lessons* appointed for this day together give us a full picture of reality – both of our sinful state ... and the free gift of forgiveness, life, and salvation that comes alone in Christ and His work on the Cross. We have to understand the truths taught in each reading **together** to get it all properly. So let's look at them ... together.

The children of Israel had wandered around the desert wilderness for some 38 years by this time. The generation of those who had sided with the ten, cowardly, **unfaithful** spies – refusing to go into the Promised Land for fear of the “giant” inhabitants ... despite God's promise to be with them to grant them victory – were near the end of their journey. But ... there were still plenty of rebellious complainers! They hadn't learned their lesson – and on top of it they had passed on their whininess to the next generation. ***Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.*** [NUM 21.5] This was more than idle dissatisfaction ... this was more than a complaint against Moses – it was dissatisfaction with the heavenly Manna ... which God had graciously provided daily (except the Sabbath) for 38 years now! It was a complaint **against God!**

If you're not quite sure that's the right way to understand this complaint, just look at the beginning of verse 5 in our *OT Lesson* and at what happened next. The beginning of verse 5 says: ***And the people spoke against God and against Moses.*** And verse 6 says: ***Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.*** Clearly, inspired Moses took it as a complaint against God when he recorded the event. Clearly, God took it as rebellion against Him – for God Himself **sent** those deadly, fiery serpents among the people ... to discipline them ... to punish them for their sinful complaining.

Then ... ***many people of Israel died***, our text says. We should learn from this, dear Christians. We should learn from this **not** to complain – as we so often do – about our lives ... especially about God's provision in our lives ... and about what kind of ***daily bread*** we receive in our lives from the hand of God. Do you complain about your current financial circumstances? Do you complain about what kind of food you can afford to put on the table? Do you complain about what kind of meals you get? Do you loathe how far you have to travel to work (or elsewhere) ... in horrible traffic? Do you wish your spouse were different? – the spouse God has given you as bone of your bones and flesh of your flesh? Do you complain daily about this or that – about having to wear the same clothes for a long time ... having only a few nice outfits ... being unable to get a new or fancier car?

Do you complain about the government God has ordained over you? ... or the boss God has given you? ... or the teacher God has placed over you in authority?

Watch your complaining – lest the LORD God send a punishment upon you like He did upon the children of Israel! It may not be fiery serpents ... but it won't be pleasant – though it will be for your own good. For the Lord your God **will** punish you for your rebellious complaining against Him – because He loves you ... and because He disciplines you as a loving Father [HEB 12.6-10] ... that you may learn to be zealous and repent [REV 3.19]. And if you have complained ... **repent** – and live in the forgiveness Christ has purchased and won for you by giving His Life!

After all, what is our sinful complaining against God and against His merciful, loving provision for our daily lives but a fiery venom – that consumes our flesh and poisons our hearts and minds against Him Who graciously created us ... and Who graciously and continuously provides for every need (and many wants) of our bodies? What is our rebellion against God but a poison that each time brings us a little closer to death? Even eternal death – should our faith die on account of this horrible, fatal venom!

In fact, in our *Epistle* St. Paul says that *you were DEAD* – already – *in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world* – indeed, says Paul – *following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience* – that is, the devil! – *among whom WE ALL once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were BY NATURE* – from conception and birth according to the flesh – *children of wrath, like the rest of mankind* [EPH 2.1-3]. We were **dead** – even **more** dead than those bitten by the fiery serpents in Moses' day; for the death about which Paul speaks is a **spiritual** death ... that leads to **eternal** death ... in a fiery hell!

What is the antidote? Just look at the *Old Testament Lesson*. The antidote for the death that came from the fiery serpents was to look to – and believe God's Word about – that which was in the form of the deadly poison, but was filled with the promise of life from God. That is, the people were to look at that which was in the likeness of what brought them death – the bronze serpent ... lifted up on the pole – and believe God's Gospel-promise that *everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live* [NUM 21.8]. So it is, dear Christian, that the antidote for **your** lusting, rebellious, death-bringing, sinful flesh is to look to the One Who came in the likeness of your sinful flesh – but was Himself **without** sin – and Who was lifted up on the pole of the Cross. Whenever you are bitten by the deadly, fiery serpent of your own sinful flesh – whether you were prompted by the devil, the world, or your own inherent sinfulness – look to Him Who came in the likeness of

your flesh ... look to Christ the Son of God incarnate in your flesh ... the One Who made Himself to be bone of your bone and flesh of your flesh ... **yet, without sin** ... lifted high upon the Cross ... nailed to the tree ... head bloodied from the mocking crown of thorns ... hands and feet pierced by cold, cruel iron ... and His sin-cleansing blood flowing down to bring you forgiveness, life, and eternal salvation. Look to Christ ... and His freely-given, once-for-all work on the Cross – look upon Christ and live!

For **there** is the ultimate expression of God's love for you ... and the whole world – the giving of His only-begotten, dearly beloved Son to the death of the Cross [JN 3.16] ... as we have it declared in our *Holy Gospel Lesson* for this ***Fourth Sunday in Lent***. There is no need for **anyone** to perish – **all** are included in Christ and His work of atonement upon the Cross. Just as the eyes of those who sought relief from the poison and who believed the promise of God – spoken through His servant Moses – beheld a fiery serpent in the likeness of their curse ... lifted up on the pole, so we (**all**) who seek relief from the poison of our sin and who believe the promise of God – spoken through His prophets, apostles, and call-and-ordained servants of the Word – behold Him Who is in the likeness of our venomous sinful flesh ... lifted up on the Cross.

For those who believe, Christ crucified is the Word of God that **no longer** speaks condemnation, but **rather** salvation and life! Much like the fiery serpent on the pole no longer brought punishment and death, but life to all who looked upon it in faith in the promise of God. ***For God did not send His Son in to the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him!*** [JN 3.17] Or, as St. Paul puts it by divine inspiration: ***But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loves us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavenly places IN Christ Jesus*** [EPH 2.4-6]. **In** Christ – united to Him by grace through faith ... united to Him like a living branch to the Life-giving Vine ... linked to Him through Baptism and faith ... nourished in Him by Word and Sacrament – **in Christ** we are already raised up (even as after He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried Christ rose victorious from the grave and ascended into heaven). **In Christ** our humanity is already seated ***with Him in the heavenly places*** [2.6]. And ***in the coming ages*** – that is, in heaven in the life that is to come – ***GOD will show us the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus*** ... eternally.

During this ***Lententide*** – as we move ever closer to ***Holy Week*** and ***Good Friday*** – we behold ***Christ Lifted Up on the Cross ... to Give LIFE!*** And all we – who have been “bitten” by that serpent, satan, and who in this life have the poison

of sin ever coursing through our veins – whenever we see Christ thus lifted up, shall live ... forever! This beholding is a continual thing – a constant *looking to Jesus, the Founder and Perfecter of our faith, Who for the joy that was set before Him endured the Cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God* – **for us and for our eternal salvation.** Behold Christ crucified ... believe ... and live!

In the Name of the FATHER and of the + SON and of the HOLY SPIRIT. [Amen]