



## Feast of the Triumph of the Holy Cross

**Father Ambrose Bennett, O.S.B.**

If tonight's readings don't puzzle and surprise you, then they should.

What are we to make of our Old Testament reading, in which God tells Moses to make a graven image of a serpent—of all things!—and then promises life and healing to all who gaze upon it? Isn't this contrary to what God had just forbidden in the First Commandment, and weren't the Israelites severely punished for making the golden calf? For the bronze serpent was no less a graven image than the golden calf. And yet God blesses the one and condemns the other.

The difference must be found, then, in the circumstances. What the First Commandment forbids is the worship of other gods, and the making of idols—that is, it forbids bowing down to such images as if they somehow “contained” or limited the divinity, with the related notion of controlling or manipulating God, or of confusing the Creator with his creation. For that was what the mythologies of the nations did: and the Israelites sinned when they wished to be like them, and to have a god like theirs.

The situation was entirely different with the bronze serpent in the wilderness: for Israel was wholly penitent for its rebellion against God and Moses. The image of the bronze serpent raised up on a pole was not a nature-god but an emblem of Israel's own transgression and punishment, in having succumbed to temptation against God's law and the authority of Moses. By raising up the bronze serpent, the Israelites were acknowledging their sin and pleading for God's mercy. God himself told them to express and embody their repentance in this way.

The bronze serpent was what we would call a *sacramental*: a visible sign that, if used with trusting faith and true repentance, brings blessing because of God's promise. For God is faithful to his covenant; and Moses was the appointed mediator of the Old Covenant, through whose intercession Israel's repentance was accepted. By gazing on this image, the Israelites could be forgiven and healed. The instrument of God's punishment becomes a sign and symbol of divine pardon.

And so it is with the Cross of Christ. When Christ likens his own raising-up on the Cross to the raising up of the bronze serpent in the wilderness, he is saying that in this way, true atonement is made before God, that this atonement is acceptable through Jesus' mediation as the new Moses, and that those who look upon his Cross with faith and repentance will be saved by him, and healed of the Serpent's bite. For the Serpent is the Devil who tempted man in paradise, leading him to eat of the forbidden fruit of the tree.



## SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



On the tree of the Cross, Christ appeared in the form of sinful humanity, dying the death of a rebel, a blasphemer, and an outcast, accused even of casting out demons by the power of the Evil One. From a purely human point of view, without faith, one might look upon his Cross and see only a good man who was crucified. Or perhaps even simply someone who made too many enemies and paid the price. But from the standpoint of Christian faith, we see in the shame and blood of the Cross the victory of God over Satan the prince of this world, and the overthrow of the Devil's usurped dominion over mankind and over creation. Through the Cross, the curse is turned to blessing, and the sentence of condemnation is cancelled out; God's humiliation on the Cross is the victory over Satan's pride.

On the Cross, God has reigned from the Tree: as paradise was lost through the wood of the tree, so it is regained through the wood of the Cross. Our King is a crucified King. By looking upon him whom our sins have pierced, who pleads for the forgiveness of his enemies, we ourselves are healed and restored. By the Cross, we are redeemed. By the Cross, we receive the pattern of true discipleship. And by the Cross, we enter into everlasting life and glory.