

**Reflection on the Gospel-The Triumph of the Cross
(John 3:13-17)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

Today's feast of the Triumph or Exaltation of the Holy Cross commemorates the tradition that Empress Helena, mother of the Roman Emperor Constantine, discovered the remains of the true Cross in Jerusalem in the 4th century CE. This 'discovery' has captured the imagination of Christians through the ages. From earliest times, the Cross has been a sign of contradiction. It was initially a cause of embarrassment and shame, a reminder that the Romans executed Jesus as a common criminal. For John, it is a sign of the God's great love for the world, evoking both the death of Jesus and his exultation in glory. It was to become the most distinctive of all Christian symbols.

The reference to the cross in the reading from John is implied rather than explicit. Jesus must be 'lifted up'-both on the cross and in his return to God. Jesus is presented as the pre-existent one, as the one who comes from God and has already ascended to God. John then evokes the ancient Israelite story of the bronze serpent lifted up by Moses. According to the story (Numbers 21:5-9), the Israelites are unhappy with their lot in the desert. They complain about the food or lack of it and blame both God and Moses. Their situation worsens with the outbreak of a plague of poisonous snakes whose bite has killed no small number of them. The people interpret the plague as punishment for their sin of speaking against God. They ask Moses to intercede with God on their behalf. God then instructs Moses to make an image of a fiery serpent and set it on a pole. Anyone affected by snakebite has only to look upon the image to find life and healing. And so it happens: the bronze serpent is lifted up and those who 'see' or 'look upon it' find life. That's the story from Israel's ancient folklore. Life and death, seeing and believing in God's love and mercy and providence are at the heart of this story.

The gospel writer taps into the collective memory of the emerging Christian community. Just as the serpent is lifted up and the people find life, so will Jesus be lifted up and those who 'see' and believe in him will have unending life. This is possible because of God's unbounded love for the world. Many of us wear a cross, often a decorative cross. The walls of Christian institutions feature the cross. The cross we wear or hang on our walls remains a sign of God's love and of our solidarity in faith with millions of believers across the ages who have sought the healing power of the God of love. This year, we might consider ways of being in solidarity with the Christians of Iraq whose very lives are in the balance.