

## Gospel text

### **John 3: 13-17**

13 Indeed, no one has gone up to heaven except the one who has come down from it, the new Adam. 14 As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so it is essential that the new Adam be lifted up, 15 so that whoever believes in him will have an endless life. 16 Indeed, God loved the world in this way: he gave his only son, that whoever believes in him should not die, but have an endless life. 17 For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but to let the world be liberated by him.

## Gospel commentary - Homily

### **Why put the cross in the spotlight?**

Linda's story is out of the ordinary. As with many women when they were told they were pregnant, she was very happy. Martin was born. Diagnosis: he suffered from trisomy 21, heart disease and pulmonary insufficiency. The child was given a year to live and advised to be placed in an institution. For Linda, it was out of the question. This is how she began to move heaven and earth so that Martin receives adequate services, convinced that in the modern world, a disabled person is a full citizen. Linda, a single parent, had to work very hard to give her son the best life possible. Until the age of 7, his son did not walk. She has spent years going from one appointment to another to children's hospital. Fortunately, her employer allowed her to be absent as many times as necessary, and she could count on her mother. But when Martin turned 18, she found herself faced with the lack of suitable services. And furthermore, since her mother no longer had the strength to take care of her grandson, she faced the fact that she needed to quit her job and stop working. Over the years Martin's health began to deteriorate. His handicap was increasing. He could no longer walk. He started having seizures. He could no longer eat alone. He no longer spoke. The last five months of his life, Linda spent them at his bedside. She was sleeping on a stretcher at the foot of his bed. He was finally struck down by aspiration pneumonia. He was going to be forty years old. "You know, madam, if your son lived so long, it is because he received a lot of love," said his doctor. \*

Why introduce the story of Linda in the reading of this little passage from the Gospel of John? Can not a Gospel be read in the setting of the banality of our ordinary lives? Yes, but extraordinary situations have the capacity to reveal what is at the heart of ordinary lives, and which often goes unnoticed. Take Jesus. If there had not been the tragic end of his death on the cross, would he have appeared very different from John the Baptist or the charismatic prophets of his time? His acceptance of his own death revealed a lifetime of constant fidelity to what he perceived to be the will of God, it was its culmination and perfect expression. We are all beings of love. But certain situations will reveal in all its splendor what lives in us.

The Gospel begins with a strange statement: "Indeed, no one has gone up to heaven except the one who has come down from it". Heaven, of course, designates God. In other words, no one can really say who God is, what he wants, what he thinks, except Jesus. There is a huge gap between the way people think and the way God thinks as revealed through Jesus. What does it mean? Beware of expressions: "Everyone agrees to say ...", "Nobody will accept that". Or worse: "God wants this, God wants that". It is important to remember. It is not because a society has made choices that these choices reflect God's way of seeing things. The Gospel directs us towards a continual listening to Jesus in order to be constantly open to the world of God. What does not make sense to us may make sense to God. "Place your child," Linda had been told.

Then comes the most difficult statement of the Gospel: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, in the same way it is essential that the new Adam be lifted up". The word "lifted up" related to Jesus refers to his elevation on the cross. In other words, it is essential that Jesus be crucified to play a healing role, like the bronze serpent of Moses lifted up on a sign in the desert. How to understand all this? What does it mean: "It is essential", or "it is necessary". Immediately, let's reject the theory of penal substitution, a twisted idea that has circulated in the history of the Church: by being himself innocent, Jesus would have received the punishment that the sinful humanity justly deserved, as if God were an irascible judge who needed to assuage his anger on an innocent man.

Historically, why did Jesus die as he died? He only followed his inner voice that he said came from his father from heaven, he was authentic, honest, true. His way of thinking and doing struck the society of his time, especially the religious power, with full force. Authenticity and inauthenticity are incompatible, they are like fire and water. "If the world hates you", reminds the evangelist to his community with these words in the mouth of Jesus, "know that they hated me first" (John 15, 18). The death from which he died is that reserved for criminal slaves who were not Roman citizens. Jesus was therefore the victim of his authenticity and his fidelity to his inner voice.

But why does the evangelist go so far as to say: "It is essential", or "it is necessary", speaking of this atrocious death? Of course, the evangelist like the first Christians, uses this expression to tell his faith that this death did not happen by chance, that it is not absurd, but that it has a meaning, a sense put in light by certain passages of the Bible, like that of the prophet Isaiah: "... object of contempt, abandoned by men, man of pain, familiar with suffering ... these are our sufferings which he carried and our pains which he was charged ... we saw him as punished, struck by God and humiliated ... in his wounds we find healing ... (53, 1-7). Without its positive impact, this death would indeed be absurd. For the Christian faith, it is the resurrection of Jesus, and his henceforth universal action on the world, which gives meaning to his death. But the question has not yet been fully answered: why was this excruciating death essential?

In a way, it is impossible to oppose the forces of evil (hatred, pettiness, envy, thirst for power, filthy ignorance, etc.) and the consequences of human weakness without an overflowing and unlimited love which is ready to give up his life. It is essential, and it will remain so until the end of human history.

But I would like to add another point on the subject. Certain borderline situations play the role of revelation. A disaster can reveal what lives in the hearts of people in a community. Nobody wants disaster. But without this disaster, hearts would not be revealed. How would Linda have realized how far her love of mother went without her son's illness? And her loving heart would never have been revealed to the media without this disease. We then understand the evangelist to write: "Indeed, God loved the world in this way: he gave his only son, so that whoever believes in him does not die, but has an endless life". Through the love of Jesus, we discovered God's love for humanity: it is as if this atrocious death had been necessary to make this discovery.

The Catholic liturgy uses this passage from the Gospel on the occasion of the feast of the "Exaltation of the Holy Cross". At first glance, there is something incongruous about extolling or praising the symbol of an ignominious death that finds itself in the spotlight. But, in fact, in the light of what we have just said about its revealing function, is it not fundamentally a huge "I love you" shouted to our humanity. And like all "I love you", it changes things that will never be the same again.

\* For the full story, see Rima Elkouri, [Au coeur de sa vie](#) (At the Heart of Her Life), [La Presse](#), Thursday August 28, 2014.

-André Gilbert, Gatineau, Septembre 2014