

EXALTATION OF THE HOLY CROSS (24TH SUNDAY) (9/13-14/2008)
Numbers 21/4-9, Psalm 78, Philippians 2/6-11, John 3/13-17

Today's feast with its Scripture readings call to mind two notable men of the past century.

One of them is still alive, Nelson Mandela.

One has gone to his eternal reward, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin.

I call them "notable" because both Mr. Mandela and the Cardinal suffered much in their lives, and today's feast is about Christ and his voluntary acceptance of suffering and death.

Paul says in the second reading: "*Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave; coming in human likeness and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross.*"

You may ask how Mandela and Bernardin fit into that scenario of Jesus who died on the cross to fulfill his Father's will.

It's not so much the actual death as it is the attitude of Jesus in the end, and the attitudes of the two men mentioned above.

Nelson Mandela was "crucified" for his campaign against apartheid policies of the South African government; he spent twenty- seven years in jail and was only released in 1990.

Upon his release from prison, he assumed leadership again among his people, and many observers expected Mandela to take revenge on his former enemies and captors.

He refused to do so and, instead espoused a national policy of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Cardinal Bernardin, in 1993, was falsely accused of sexual abuse by a young man; shortly after that he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer.

Within a short space of time, he suffered the loss of his reputation and his health.

When it became evident to all that the allegations against him were trumped up, the Cardinal was faced with a decision.

How should he treat the young man and his lawyer who had brought the allegation forward?

He intentionally chose not to retaliate, but to offer forgiveness to the young man whom he then visited in a most conciliatory pastoral gesture.

As for the lawyer, the Cardinal issued a warning, but took no further action against him though he did have the option of denouncing him for his unethical behavior.

All of us experience the cross in our lives in some form or other, at some time or other.

How do we live with it, how do we handle it?

Jesus accepted the inevitable death with trust in his Father's will.

Among his last words were these: "*Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.*"

Both Mandela and the Cardinal chose to follow the example of Christ

I know of a young man who recently felt he had been cheated by his business partners.

Rather than seek some way of resolving the issue, he has vowed to seek revenge.

His whole life is going down hill; he is bitter and hateful.

We are presented with choices when suffering comes our way.

We have marvelous examples of courageous action and we have examples of behavior that only perpetuates the evil.

When the cross inevitably comes, how shall we respond?