

May I speak in the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The figure of Pilate features quite prominently in that gospel reading that we've just heard, and there's so much that one could say about him. He's an intriguing figure. But this morning I just want to pick out one phrase that he says in that reading. It's what Pilate says to the baying crowd after he's had Jesus beaten and scourged and he's put a spoof crown and robe on him and he's slapped him and he teases the crowd saying, "Look, I'm going to bring him out."

As Jesus comes out, Pilate presents Jesus to the crowd and says, "Behold the man." It's clearly said in a mocking and ironic tone. Pilate's saying, "Look at him. This person you said was so powerful, this person who was causing all this trouble. Look at him, blooded, beaten, and bowed. He doesn't look much now, does he?" Pilate's saying to the crowd.

Pilate might have thought his words were mocking, but in a way, he's speaking perhaps what God might have said at that moment. God invites all humanity to behold the man, to see what was happening on that first Good Friday as central to the story of history. The invitation was extended for all people to look closely at the man who is God in human form. Behold the man, pay close attention to who he truly is and what he is about to accomplish.

Now, this isn't the first invitation in John to look. There's a rather strange reference earlier in the gospel to a story from the Old Testament, where Jesus says, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

Jesus is referring here to a story in the Old Testament where the people of Israel were in the wilderness, crying out to God for help. And God instructed Moses to make a brass serpent, put it on a pole and lift it up, and sure enough as he did that, the people who looked at the serpent were healed

of their afflictions. And so, we're invited in the gospel to look at the cross in a similar way.

In John's gospel, there's many references like the reference to the story in the Old Testament to Jesus being lifted up. That phrase comes several times, and it's the same phrase that's used for Jesus being lifted up on the cross. So, what the gospel is inviting us to do is saying that just as Jesus was lifted up on the cross, as that serpent was lifted up, and all who looked was saved, so we look at the cross at the one who was lifted up, we too will be saved just as the people of Israel were.

On Good Friday, we're called to look intently at the cross. We're called to look without turning away, to pay proper attention. We are to look and see what was happening on the cross that first Good Friday. We're to see a great battle being fought between the forces of good and the forces of evil. We're to see that a great sacrifice is being made on our behalf in order to pay for our sins. We're to see the cross as a great act of love: Jesus laying down his life for his friends. We're called today to stay focused and to look intently.

I once saw something very disturbing on television. It was a mother with her autistic child and there was a therapist promoting a therapy, which is now quite controversial, called holding therapy, which involved a mother holding this young child very, very tightly and not letting go. And the mother was invited just to look in the eyes of the child to establish eye contact, which the autistic child didn't want to do. And the child was thrashing around from side to side, and that was the disturbing bit because the mother was holding tight for quite a long time whilst the child did all they could do to avert her gaze.

Eventually the child just got worn out and did look at the mother in the eyes and returned her gaze. And at that moment, as they looked at each other, a great peace came, and the child stopped thrashing around and they stayed quietly looking at each other. And too often we are like that child, tossing and turning, finding reasons not to look

intently at Jesus and not to pay the cross the attention that it deserves.

Today is a time to put that right. Our service includes a time of adoration of the cross. It's a time simply to look at the cross, to behold what was happening there. And we have the opportunity if we like to come forward and to kneel at the foot of the cross.

There was once an archbishop in Paris, a Roman Catholic archbishop, who told the story of a group of young men who burst into a church just to cause havoc. And this young man was challenged by his ne'er-do-well friends to go and abuse the figure on the cross at the front of the church.

While not wanting to appear timid, the young man took up the challenge and cursed something dreadful at the figure on the cross. And a priest heard him do this and just quietly took him to one side and said, "Look, if you are really tough, why don't you repeat that whilst looking at the figure on the cross?"

Well, not wanting to appear weak, the young man took up the priest's challenge. The figure on the cross, the head was bowed. So to look into the face and repeat his curse, he had to kneel down in front of the cross. And he did kneel down and he looked up at the face of the figure on the cross, but he couldn't bring himself to curse because he suddenly saw in that moment why that figure was on the cross, that that figure on the cross was there because he loved the young man who was prepared to curse him. And the archbishop said, "I know that story is true because I was that young man."

So, I invite you when it comes to our time of adoration, the adoration of the cross, to truly behold the cross. To look at it, to pay it attention, and to see there the source of our salvation. To see the love that God in Christ was demonstrating then to all His people, to each of us, to see on the cross the one who came down from heaven to be lifted up on the cross. Amen.