

An old friend called me today. He and I served in the Pacific during the late 1990s, and have kept in touch over the last decade. During that time, he's served in both active duty and reserve duties. He wasn't able to come to my ordination because he had to begin his "chief's initiation." What that means is that he had been selected for the rank of a senior enlisted, and traditionally in the Navy, that's a big step. He told me that a lot of it was like a fraternity initiation. As a final step, he had to make a coffin and a tombstone to bury his old uniform. And he was off to Walmart to buy what he needed for that.

My friend is moving on to a new phase of his career. But even though he's putting on a new uniform, he's still the same guy.

And, back when we were in the Navy together, we had chiefs in charge of us. For him, that's changing. Now he's in charge. And the examples we've had of leadership are good and bad. Some of the chiefs we remember as people who helped us to become better people. Others tore us down, or put us down; as if that made them any more in charge or made their higher rank any higher.

In the Second Reading, Saint Paul poetically speaks about the exaltation of Jesus, as well as his divinity and his humanity.

In these five lines from Scripture, there is a wealth of knowledge conveyed about Jesus.

First, it says "though he was in the form of God, [Jesus] did not deem equality with God something to be grasped."

What this means is that even though Jesus is God, he didn't wave it in everybody's face. He doesn't need to prove that he is God to anybody. Showing off that he was God wouldn't make him any more the Son of God. He was God, plain and simple.

Secondly, "rather, he emptied himself ... he humbled himself ... becoming obedient to death ... death on a cross."

That is, instead of talking about being God, or making a big deal about being God, Jesus did what he knew best – he was God.

Remember, in the life of the Trinity, the Father gives everything that He is to the Son; who in turn receives it all, and then gives it all back to the Father. This gift of self, this self-giving within the Trinity is in itself the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit.

When the Son of God becomes human, his total self gift results in the passion, death, and resurrection.

In the first reading, the Israelites speak out and complain against Moses and God. They're sick of the manna. They're sick of wandering. They don't like the food. They don't like the water.

Let's look at what's happened up to this point for Israel: this is the second generation who have been in the desert. They've known nothing but the desert. They've eaten nothing but manna. For their entire lives, this is all they've known. They've never been to Egypt. When another nation would attack them, they only needed to sit tight and let God fight the battle for them.

As if that wasn't a big enough miracle, their clothes never wore out. Their shoes never wore out. They never got sick. Not a sniffle. They had everything they needed, and it just wasn't enough for them.

In other words, what are they complaining about? And more so, what are they talking about? Everything they have, they have because of God. Everything they have, was a gift, given to them by God – poured out on them by God.

And here they are, talking about a place they've never even been ... Egypt ... and telling God that they think they want that over everything they've been given their entire lives.

And they're brought down by a little snake. And when they repent, Moses mounts an image of the snake on a stick, and holds it up for them to look at.

Even when they sinned, even when they got sick, God provides the means for them to be cured!

In the Gospel, Jesus speaks about his passion and death; and compares it to this event from Israel's past.

Just as the snake is lifted up, Jesus will be lifted up.

Again, Jesus doesn't save us by waving his divinity in our faces. Instead, he takes upon himself our humanity. And in taking on our humanity, takes upon himself our sin, and offers it to the Father. He takes our spiritual sickness and redeems it through his passion and death on the cross.

And as St. Paul says at the end, the Father greatly exalts Jesus. Why? Well, we're back in the life of the Trinity. Jesus pours everything out to the Father, and the Father pours everything back to the Son.

And that is where we belong – as adopted sons and daughters of God – right in the middle of the life of the Trinity. We don't become more of a child of God by making a big deal about it. We become more of a child of God by receiving what God pours out for us, and returning it to him as our own self-gift. You don't receive by grasping, and you can't give by grasping, either.

Let us pray that we may know ourselves as God knows us, as God created us to be. And that we may not grasp onto those things that keep us from realizing our true selves in Christ – that is, as sons and daughters of God in Jesus Christ, filled with the Holy Spirit.