



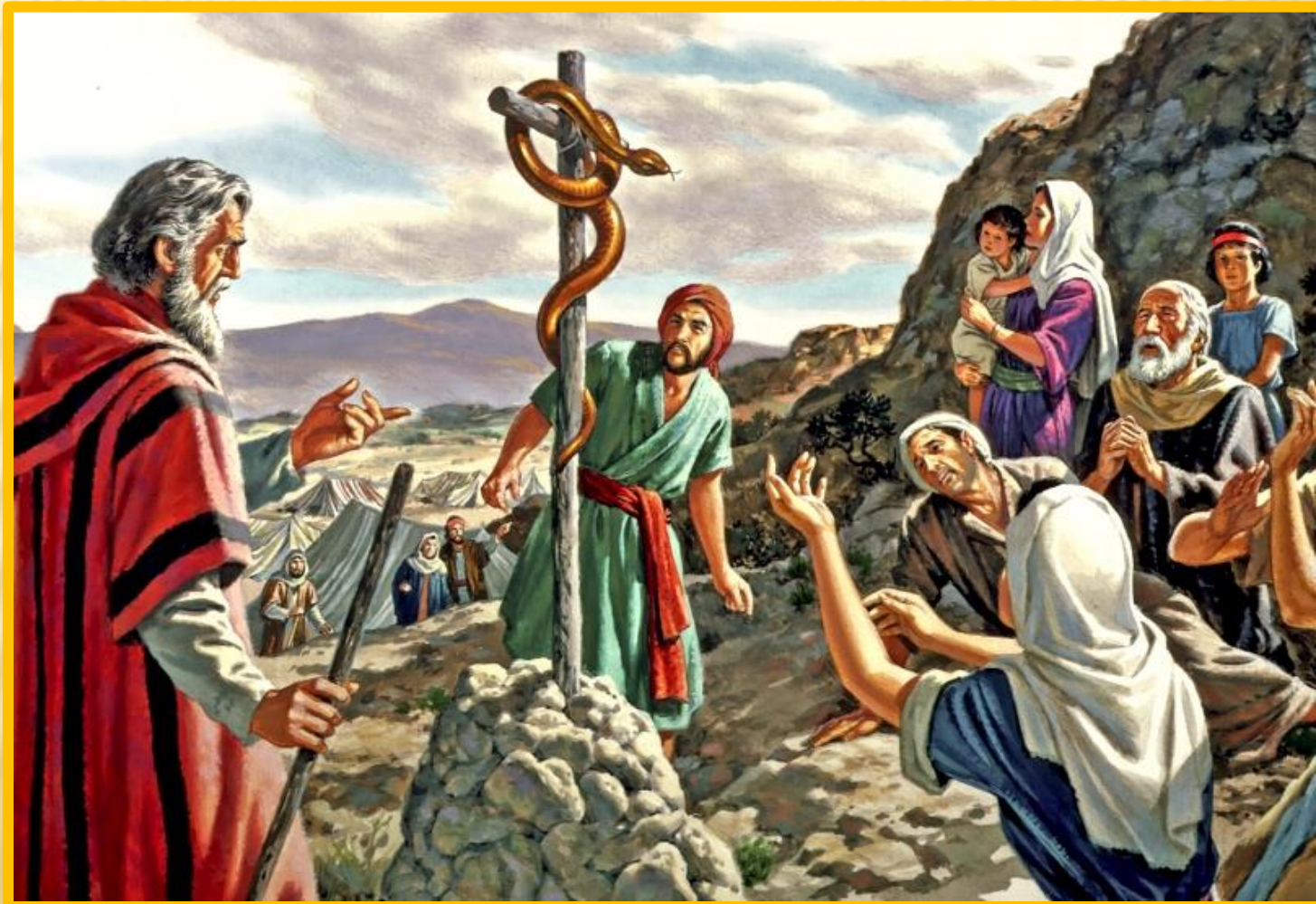
CHURCH

THE WORSHIPPING COMMUNITY

CATECHETICAL TEXTBOOK SERIES OF THE SYRO - MALABAR CHURCH

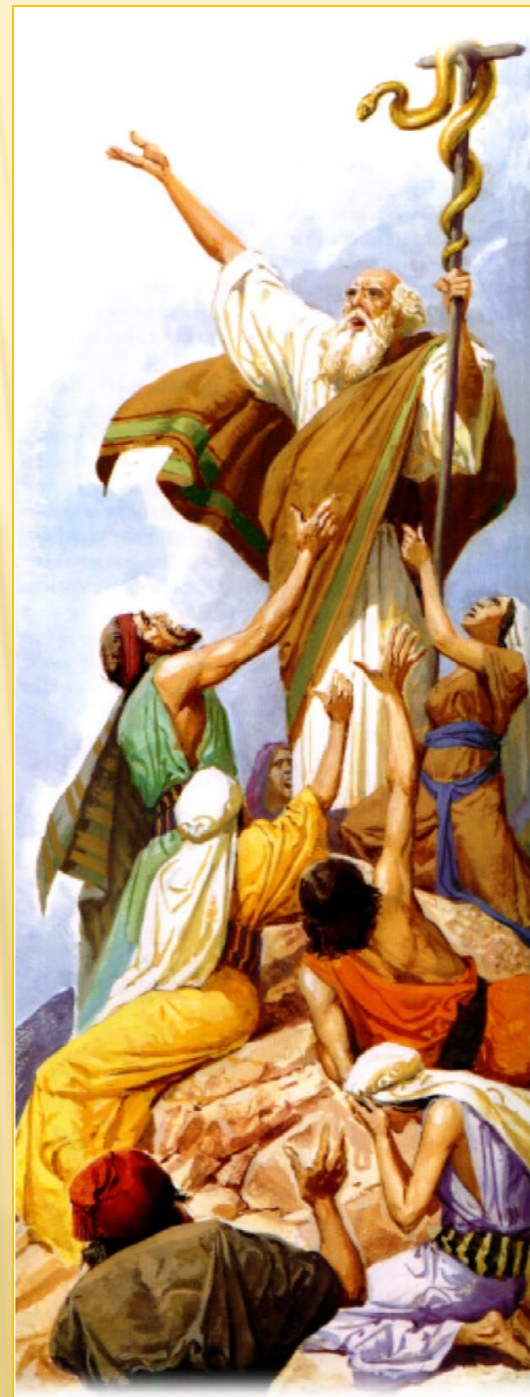
LESSON 2

SIGNS AND SYMBOLS



The Israelites, during their journey to the promised land of Canaan, after being released from the slavery of Egypt, spoke against God and Moses. Then, the Lord sent poisonous serpents into their midst. They bit them and many died. They came to Moses and said: "We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us". So, Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses: "Make a bronze serpent and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So, Moses made a serpent of bronze and fixed it upon a pole; and, whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at it and live. (Num. 21: 5-9)

This bronze serpent was a sign of salvation and it was consummated in Jesus. Jesus said: "And when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." (Jn. 12: 32). **And it was realized on Calvary.**



SIGNS IN DAILY LIFE

Signs have much importance in daily life. Man is in constant contact with many realities that are beyond his sensory perceptions; and he gets in touch with them through certain media. For instance, love is an abstract truth; but can very well be expressed through certain concrete signs. Embracing, giving gifts etc. are visible signs of love.

Similarly, clapping and dancing are signs of happiness and applause. The sign posts indicating the directions of roads and the boards showing the geographical location of places are signs. Our spoken words and gestures are signs to connote any abstract invisible reality. In short, human life is impossible without signs.



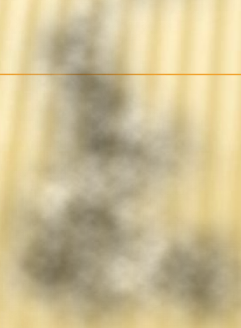
NATURAL AND ACQUIRED / ASSUMED SIGNS

There are two types of signs: natural and acquired / assumed. Whereas natural signs have direct relation with the referred realities, assumed signs are attributed by man out of assumptions; fire is a reality and smoke emanating from it is its sign. It is an example for a natural sign. National flag is an example of an assumed sign.



ACTIVITY -1

Divide the students into different groups and ask them to find out the maximum number of signs and symbols used in our liturgy. Ask them also to discuss about the problems that may arise if the people do not understand their meaning.



SIGNS AND SYMBOLS

There are fundamental differences between signs and symbols. **All symbols are signs; but all signs are not symbols.** Symbols are woven out of man's power of free thinking. For example, a balance symbolizes justice, a flying dove with an olive leaf in its beak stands for peace and the scepter for kingship.





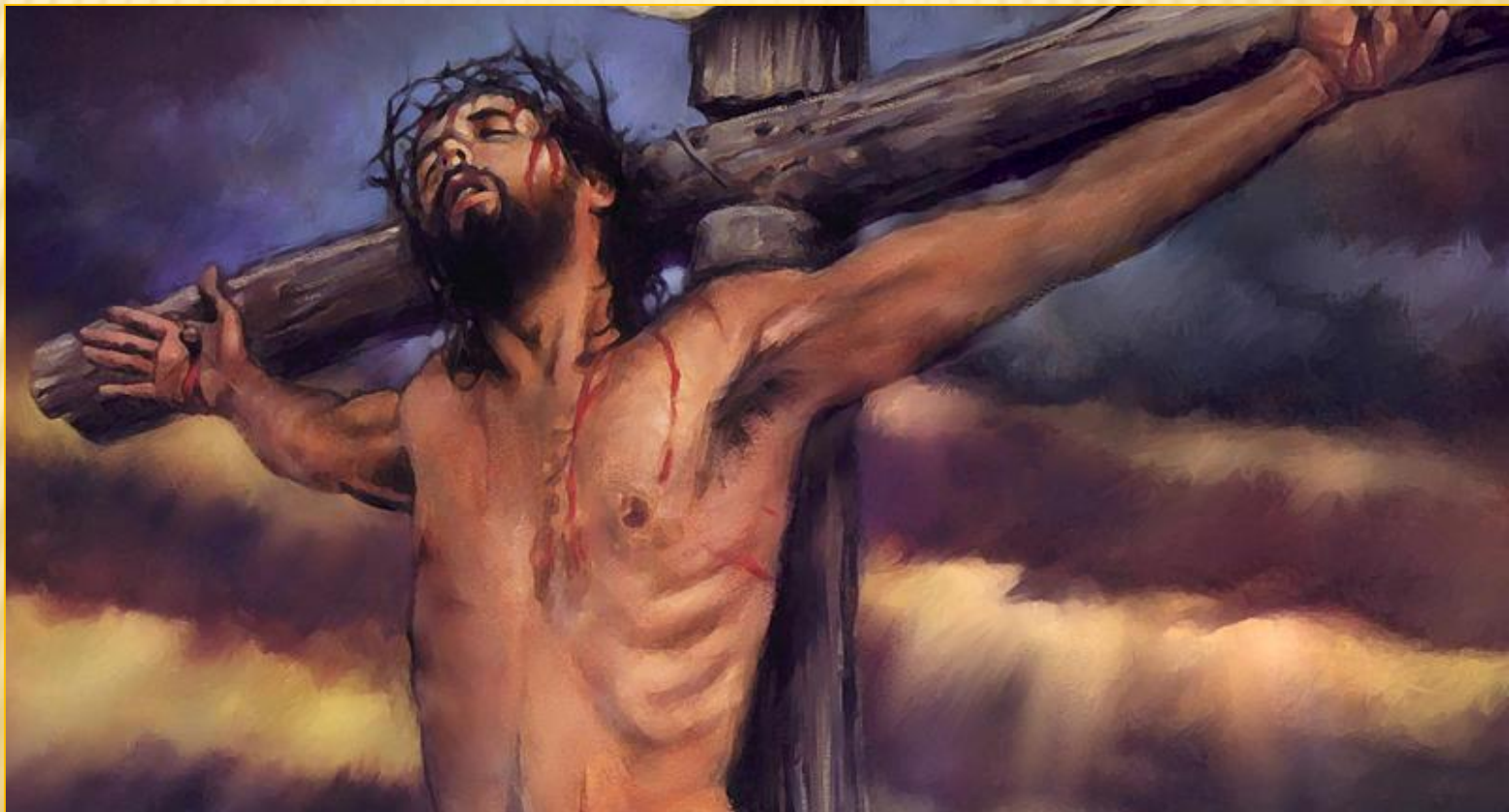
SIGNS AND SYMBOLS IN WORSHIP OF GOD

Worship of God is the means to experience God. It is thus man meets and experiences God. How can man experience the invisible and majestic God? Here comes the appropriateness of signs and symbols. **Yes, the signs and symbols do help us experience the invisible God.**

There are certain officially recognized signs and symbols signifying the heavenly realities of our salvation. **The liturgy contains signs fixed and formulated by the Mother Church under the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit and with the authority granted by Jesus.**

THE SACRAMENTS AS SIGNS

The sacraments are signs revealing and making available the invisible heavenly realities. We receive invisible grace through the visible signs of the sacraments. What happens here is a participation in the salvation Jesus secured through His sacrificial offering.

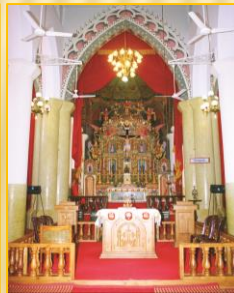


THE DIFFERENT SIGNS USED IN THE WORSHIP OF GOD

Words, actions, objects, places, individuals, arts, and time (seasons) are the various signs used in the worship of God. If we understand properly the exact meanings of these signs, we would be able to participate in the worship of God, especially the Holy Qurbana.

ACTIVITY -2

Ask the students to visit their parish church and ask them to find out different signs and symbols in the church. Ask them also to write down the meaning of those signs and symbols.



Words

Words are the frequently used signs in the worship of God; they are the most important as well. All words used are signs to exchange ideas. The very intention and meaning of the rituals are revealed through words.

For example:

1. The prayer by the celebrant when washing hands, in the holy Qurbana clarifies the meaning of the washing of hands: 'May God, the Lord of all, wash away the stains of our debts and sins in the ocean of His mercy.'
2. The prayer said on pouring water on the head of the candidate in baptism makes it a sacrament.



ACTIONS

These are the different movements and postures of our body; each of these has particular meaning. Certain actions indicate the inner feelings. For example, bowing, stretching out of hands, standing, kneeling etc. signify diverse inner attitudes. Certain actions center on other objects. Blessing, anointing, making a sign of the cross, lamp-lighting etc. are examples.

OBJECTS

We can divide the objects used in liturgy into two groups - natural and man made. If water, wine, oil and bread are natural objects, the altar and sacred vestments are man-made.





PLACES

Every place connected with liturgy has symbolic meaning; the sanctuary, the bema, the bethgazza, the font and other places used in the liturgy indicate particular meanings.

INDIVIDUALS

All the faithful assembling for the worship of God are symbols. For instance, the priest who celebrates the holy Qurbana represents Jesus and the deacons, the angels.



ARTS

There is symbolic meaning for the arts used in the liturgy. The architecturally decorated sanctuary represents glorious heaven and the hymns chanted during the liturgy remind us of the heavenly songs of praise by the angels.



SEASONS / TIME

God and the divine mysteries are beyond time. But man is dependent on time. The divine mysteries which are beyond time can only be represented through signs. The Church, hence, introduces the mysteries of salvation, that are beyond time, through the liturgical year and the different feasts of the liturgical year.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SIGNS AND SYMBOLS

The liturgy is enriched with signs and symbols. But, all these signs and symbols are not separate entities; they merge with each other and become one. It is in the design of the divine scheme that we use signs. **This is what we come across in Incarnation. The invisible God became man to reveal His love. Jesus instituted the Church, so that man may experience the fruits of salvation secured by him; He also instituted the sacraments in his Church for the attainment of salvation. Following this example of Jesus, the Church instituted signs in liturgy.**

We must accept these signs and understand the realities signified through them. We must believe that we can obtain the grace of God as symbolized through the signs. If we want to participate actively in the holy Qurbana, we must understand the meaning of the signs and symbols giving due importance to the realities indicated through them. The intensity of our experience in the adoration of God and the consequent result will, no doubt, depend upon our awareness of the signs and our faith in them.



**LET US
READ AND MEDITATE
THE WORD OF GOD**

(Rev. 4 : 1 - 11)



A VERSE TO REMEMBER

You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power.” (Rev. 4:11).

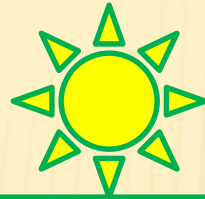
LET US PRAY

O, God! Who revealed yourself through signs and symbols; bless us so that we may worship you by participating actively in the holy Qurbana and the sacraments.



MY RESOLUTION

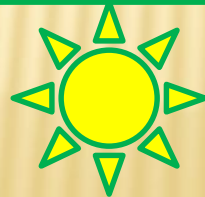
With due respect I will regard the temple of God
and the sacred articles.



TEACHINGS OF THE FATHERS OF THE CHURCH

We offer sacrifice to God not because He demands it, but to thank Him for all His gifts and to sanctify creation.

(St. Irenaeus)



QUESTIONS

1. How was the sign of the bronze serpent fulfilled in Jesus?
2. What are the differences between signs and symbols?
3. Write a short note: signs and symbols in the liturgy.
4. How many sets of signs are there in the liturgy? Name them.
5. Explain the importance of signs and symbols in the liturgy?



Thank you