

Lent 4B. 22nd March, 2009.

Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107; Eph 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

Lifted High

What was Moses doing? Lifting up a bronze serpent, of all things, to be a means for healing. What a mixed sort of symbol...what was the message in that? You can imagine, for the everyday Israelite, being brought up on the stories of creation, that the serpent wasn't exactly something to use to signify healing and life. Every God-fearing Hebrew person knew that humankind had got into a complete mess –had fallen from the life Yahweh had intended for them- because of that snake way back in the Garden of Eden.

So- a snake, a serpent. Even out there in the wilderness, where they were traipsing around year after year, hanging onto God's promise that they would really and truly and finally get to the Promised Land –even out there, the serpent arose to give trouble. Serpents everywhere, biting them....and people dying all over the place! Inflicted on them, it seems, because after their victorious escape from slavery in Egypt, they're now complaining and rebelling because it's hard work in this journey to freedom. So, with this business of the serpents, what does Yahweh do, when they came all fearful and apologetic to Moses, asking him to pray to the Lord to take away the serpents?

It seems it's too simple for Jahweh to make them disappear. No: God tells Moses to make a serpent, erect it on a pole and lift it up, so if anyone was bitten, they could look at it and live. Why on earth do that? Why should they go through the distress, the pain, the fear of being bitten? The logic of it was confusing, for a start. The serpent, from the time of creation, was known as the deceiver, the seducer, the one who was instrumental in inciting rebellion against God and in taking away life and destroying the relationship God desired to have with humankind. *That* serpent signalled that humankind wanted to make a world where God would be disregarded. And, now, here in the wilderness, the serpent again is a killer: and is again a symbol of the deadly consequences of rejecting the life and liberation offered by God. Why lift up, exalt, a symbol of murderous deceit and rebellion, when really, all Yahweh had to do was make the snakes go away?

If we were to view this through a framework of a deep spirituality, what we might see is this: the snake, the symbol of death, and of humanity's capacity to fall and follow the wrong way, is held up in front of the people as a reminder of their capacity to rebel against God –like a mirror. In looking at the serpent, people are thus confronted with the evil and brokenness in themselves, and are reminded that it is only by God's grace that death can be turned into life, evil to good, and brokenness to wholeness. The antidote to the poison of the serpents –the antidote to rebellion and death- was one's own willingness to confront one's own sin; and also, obedience to God's instructions, to look into the face of the perpetrator of death, and so gain healing and life. To simply remove the serpents –even these days symbolic of any source of pain or evil in our lives – would take away the opportunity for people to

have cause to reflect on their own collusion with evil, and would deny them their own response of willingness to follow God's way of life. In a sense, the very symbol of death is "deconstructed", stripped of its power and given another meaning, because it now stands for life.

All well and good – even Jewish Rabbis explain the meaning of the story in terms like that.

But.....for us, followers of Christ, the story doesn't just stop there. Our Gospel reading today takes us to Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, that learned and respected leader of the Jews, who came to Jesus secretly under the cover of darkness to try to see and work out who this Jesus was. After a conversation about being born again of water and the Spirit –which Nicodemus found perplexing and quite unresolved–Jesus introduces the image of Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness. "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, must be exalted, glorified."

Let's hold that image in front of us – or even better, look up at the crucified Jesus high on our wall behind the altar. Jesus lifted up on the cross; nailed to the cross. I encourage you, too, to spend some time looking at the posters for stations 11 and 12 –"Jesus is nailed to the cross", and "Jesus dies on the Cross". They're graphic and they're horrible. I've found it very difficult to keep my gaze on his hands. Yet this very image of a cruel and painful death has become the image or symbol for *life* for followers of Christ. Like the serpent on the pole - the cross - this implement of torture and execution; and the person of an innocent Christ himself nailed onto it, now stands for us as a sign of life and truth and love. The crucified Jesus is before us as both the sign of the ultimate consequence of human evil, and of the ultimate victory of Christ over evil through the power of suffering love.

But yet – there seems to be a clashing or tension between these two symbols –the serpent and the Christ. In one way, Christ's death and the serpent are both confronting reminders of the consequences of death and rebellion. And we are healed or given life, in turning ourselves intentionally towards Christ, like the Hebrew people looking on the serpent,. We can also look upon Jesus on the cross and be reminded of God's great love and grace and forgiveness because Christ came out on the other side of death with his resurrection.

But can we liken Christ to the serpent? That's what seems odd: Yes – what is being nailed to the cross is rebellious, dark and lost humanity, deceived and deceitful –the very humanity and lost world that Christ came to share life with. What's being nailed to the cross is our own very brokenness and darkness, and a reminder that humankind can choose death over life; and indeed did choose to put life to death in nailing up Jesus. So we can look up there at Christ crucified and see ourselves –see our capacity to be amongst the mob that didn't then, and doesn't now, want to see him, acknowledge him or have him as complete and absolute Lord in our lives; and we can see our potential to be amongst the mob that crucified him and continues to crucify him through rejection and unfaithfulness; and at the same time we see Christ holding or gathering into himself all of that rebellion that humanity is capable of –that

you and I are capable of. And, then, through that cross, on that cross, that pole lifted high, putting all of that dark side of humanity to death in order to give us (not just him) new, resurrected life.

In the end, what was put to death was death itself, because now anyone who looks to Christ, who actually sees him for who he is and believes in him, is given life. And it's a very, very strong message in the Gospel of John, that *that* life – eternal life - is *now*: it starts with our seeing of Jesus, with that god-given, God-graced light switching on in the darkness of our lives, so that we can see and know and recognise that this is God. It's not a time-lined life after death that this Gospel emphasises –it's life starting *now*. Eternal life is about the life *of* God and *with* God, that is found here and now, and continues after our mortal deaths; and is known particularly in the times of deepest darkness in our living. It's what John names and celebrates as *life and light*, and, later in his gospel, as *abundance* or *fullness of life*. Being “condemned”, as we read in that passage today, is the choice to live outside of that abundance and light and life.

Now, I guess this is all pretty heavy; but then, so is this Lenten season; and so is the crucifixion. And there's a whole lot more in that Gospel passage that's incredibly significant in taking hold of that gift of life offered to us in Christ, and in beginning to grasp what it is that God has done for us in Christ. And there's nothing here of that distorted theology of a wrathful God demanding to be appeased: “God so loved the world...”, and from the Ephesians reading: “God who is rich in mercy, out of his great love with which he loved us...” But there's no time right now to dig further.

As we move towards the climax of Christ's passion and death, and the promise of new life, keep your eyes fixed up there, on Christ lifted high, crucified and exalted. See your old self up there with him, and look to him for life- real life!