

John Whitehead

HOMILY: 14 MARCH 2021

Numbers 21: 4-9

Ephesians 2: 1-10

John 3: 14-21

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord.

There seems to have been something of a slithering theme in recent times. Last week, Esma told the story of the Swami and the Snake, today we have serpents in the Sinai, and in between times our brothers and sisters in Australia have been extending their ever-innovating line in exports to pythons in a pipe. And in these days of viruses and their variants, I'm reminded that the symbol for medicine involves a snake entwined around the staff of Asclepius.

According to those who track and measure such things, there have been some common observable trends and impacts of the Pandemic. Apparently, quite a proportion of people have felt extreme loneliness or isolation in the middle of lockdowns while others have found the slower pace and islands of tranquillity really restorative. There has been an increase in anxiety and depression, and in attempted suicides. And apparently, many of us have been experiencing much more vivid dreams.

Today's lesson has some of the characteristics of a vivid dream. I gather it is not uncommon to dream of snakes appearing everywhere out of holes, behind rocks, and dropping out of trees and then having the sense of being chased and bitten by them. It certainly must have been a frightening experience in the

wilderness for the children of Israel. And then Moses is told to make a serpent of bronze, and to lift it up so that those who look upon it will be healed. That feels a bit like the contrariness of dreams – making a graven image was forbidden for the Jews, but here they are being told to look at it and be saved from death.

It is tempting to draw parallels with the Pandemic. Instead of snakes we have Covid-19 viruses infecting us, and we're all trying to escape from them in one way or another. But now we have a vaccine protection lifted up before us with the promise of not only saving ourselves but also others from the deadly disease.

Well, it takes a bit of imagination to draw that parallel, so I will not dwell on it. But John certainly draws a parallel between the lifting up of the serpent in the desert and the lifting up of the Son of Man on the Cross (and ultimately in Glory).

Our Gospel reading – from John Chapter 3 – is hugely significant in the development of Christian theology, coming after the amazing dialogue with Nicodemus, and dealing as it does with the centrality of Christ, the love of God, and the paradox of love and judgement. And it contains that wonderful verse – John 3.16 – that sums up our faith so succinctly in less than 30 words:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life.”

In reflecting on the verse, so familiar that one can quote it off rapidly by heart and in doing so miss the depths of meaning in it, three themes stood out for me. The first of these is the idea of God as a God of Love – a theme that keeps being repeated throughout John's writings.

As Jewish understanding of the One God developed over the centuries, He was often seen as an angry, unforgiving God demanding punishment and sacrifice in order to be placated. This carried through in some views of the Christian concept of atonement, with a contrasting “gentle Jesus, meek and mild” having to be sacrificed to meet the demands of a stern and furious Father.

The simple statement that “God so loved...” turns this whole idea on its head. Far from an overbearing monarch demanding absolute compliance and obedience before He might even consider forgiving us, it is God who initiates our salvation, a God of Love openly offering us reconciliation. Far be it from me to suggest that a father’s love is somehow inferior, but perhaps on this Mothering Sunday grasping the unconditional nature of God’s love is made easier if we think of the unconditional love of a mother for her children.

The second theme I’d like to draw out is the sheer breadth of God’s love. You don’t have to be one of a favoured few – a Moses or an Elijah, a Gandhi or a Mother Teresa - to be loved by God. Nor is God’s love confined to a Chosen People, or even those who naturally or easily turn towards Him. Rather, we are told, God so loved **the world...**, that is all of humanity, that he gave us his only Son. Each and everyone of us is an utterly, unconditionally-loved daughter or son of God. How amazing is that?!

The third theme focuses on the nature of belief. Speaking personally, I was born an Anglican, if such a thing is possible. This meant that developing an understanding of what my faith meant to me has come as a series of revelations – of hopefully increasing clarity – as the years have gone by, and no doubt will continue to do so for what life remains to me.

So it was with the word “belief”. When as a child I first thought about the meaning of this term I found it very easy. Of course, I believed that Jesus

existed: there wasn't much challenge in that at all. Later on, I came to see the concept as one of intellectual acceptance, of believing what I read about the life of Jesus and his great purpose as somehow factually correct.

Later still, I have come to see how unsatisfactory such a view of belief is. Why should it depend on when and where I was born – the random probabilities of life and of intellectual endowment – as to whether I would come to salvation? This suggested an arbitrariness to God inconsistent with any concept of fairness or justice.

Part of the problem lies in the subtle changes and nuances in the meaning of words as the years roll by. If we go back to the Greek of the New Testament, the meaning of the verb translated as “believe”, *PISTUEO*, meaning yes, firm persuasion; but also assurance, firm conviction and faithfulness.

In John 3:16 it means believing with all our heart that Jesus is the Son of God who reveals the true nature of God, and thus (in the words of the wonderful hymn of Isaac Watts) “...demands my soul, my life, my all.” We are so committed that we turn our whole life, as best as we are able, to serving the will of God. If God's grace can be thought of as demanding a price, it is this ongoing sense of commitment.

When you think about it, committing your whole life as a matter of faith involves a huge risk. Each of us has only one life on this earth after all, but there can be no crown without a cross. And of course we all fall short from time to time, but fortunately, the love and forgiveness of God knows no limit.

John's insight that God is a God of Love – John's letters go even further and say “God is Love” – is so wonderful to me that it would be easy to stop there. But John goes on beyond verse 16 to talk about judgement – those who do not

believe are condemned. Are we back so quickly to the view of a stern and severe Almighty judge? Take verses 19 and 20:

“And this is the judgement, that the light had come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.”

It would need a far better theologian than I to understand the paradox of this conjunction of love alongside judgement, but let me offer this thought. Going back to my childhood, I convinced myself at an early age that I did not like fruit, and so I refused to eat it. In doing so, I made a judgement about myself, not (as I thought) about the tastiness or nutritional value of fruit, and all it could offer me. If I hadn't changed, at least partially in my case, I would have condemned myself to a life without fruit. Going back to the Covid analogy, we are free to reject the offer of a vaccine, but in doing so we condemn ourselves to the consequences, whatever we believe those to be.

So it is with God's Grace, with the free and gracious gift of salvation. We need to make a choice, a judgement. We can decide to embrace that gift and the promise of eternal life, or we can reject it and make a judgement in favour of the alternative.

I pray that you will have life, and have it abundantly. Amen.