

Lent 4
15/3/2015

Mark the Evangelist

Numbers 21:4-9

Psalm 107

John 3:14-21

Salvation's sinful form

Some of you are probably familiar with Yann Martel's "Life of Pi". This is the story of young Pi Patel who finds himself the sole survivor of a shipwreck, with the exception of a 200 kilogram Bengal Tiger, with whom he shares a lifeboat for 7 months!

It's an extraordinary story but, without giving the story away, at the very, very end there is a twist: young Pi presents us with an equally extraordinary but now appalling alternative account of what happened during those 7 months.

The real twist, however, is what is done to the reader. Having been given the alternative account of events, it is then left to us to decide which account to choose. On the one hand there's the almost-but-not-quite-plausible story with the tiger, and on the other hand the equally extraordinary but in fact horrendously plausible alternative. Pi asks: which story do you prefer – the implausible one with the tiger, or the plausible but horrific one without?

With the characters in the book to whom the two accounts are given, we have to decide between the stories. And our view of the world and our humanity in it are both at stake. We have to decide whether to go with what doesn't quite make sense but if true would just be an interesting story, or to go with what does make sense but would scare the "bejesus" into us, for it is a horrifying alternative. This is a decision about what the world is like: are people actually capable of such things? It is essentially a decision about *involvement*: has this story anything to do with us, in a fundamental sense?

As it is for Pi in his boat, so it is for Jesus on his cross: what actually is happening here? Is this a story external to us, or is it somehow also our story? If it is somehow our story then it *involves* us, and could possibly be a saving story – a story actually worth telling, more than mere amusement.

What, then, is happening at the cross? We take our lead from the first line of the gospel reading this morning:

...just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

The "lifting up" Jesus refers to here is his crucifixion. (This way of talking is peculiar to John; see also 8.28; 12.31-36). Jesus draws a link between the cross and the lifting up by Moses of a bronze serpent on a pole, as described in the strange story we've heard today from the book of Numbers (Numbers 21.4-9). Having left Egypt and while still wandering around in the desert, the people of Israel began to complain bitterly against Moses and God for how well things were not going. In response, God sends snakes among the people with disastrous effect. The people repent and call out to God through Moses. Moses makes a serpent of bronze, places it on a pole and sets it up so that any person who was bitten could look upon the image and be healed.

It's an odd story to modern ears but our purpose here is not to debate the could- or couldn't-haves of the story. We are trying to understand how the story tells us about

what is happening in the crucifixion of Jesus. How can looking to the cross be a saving thing, as looking at the bronze serpent saved? The critical thing in this connection is that *the source of the healing takes the form of the sign of the sin.*

The serpents are sent among the people as the sign of the broken relationship with God and his servant Moses. But this sign then becomes the means God gives by which the people are saved. God gives both the punishment and the healing, and the healing sign reflects the sign of the sin. The sign of the people's sinfulness is what God then presents to them *as the means of their salvation*: forgiveness is not forgetfulness. I must recall what I'm being forgiven because the forgiveness comes in the shape of the sign of the sin.

Taking this lead, we can get a better sense of what John would have us believe "really happened" in the "lifting up" of the crucifixion. "Just as" Moses lifted up the snake, so also Jesus is lifted up. "Just as" with the bronze serpent God uses the sign of sin as the source of healing, so also we are to read Jesus' death as the sign not only of divine healing (as the text suggests) but also of human sinfulness. The crucified Jesus can be the location of the healing *because* the crucifixion is the sign of the people's failure. The cross of Jesus only saves us if it *is* also the sign of our failure.

Having declared that this is the true accounting for the crucifixion of Jesus, Scripture simply waits for us to decide: which version of the crucifixion story do you prefer? Is the cross simply what happens too often in human history – the tragedy of the hero who is crushed in the machinery of human brutality, one more incidence of "man's inhumanity to man" as we said in the old money. Certainly it has been read often enough that way both in and out of the church.

Yet we have no real investment in such a reading of the story, other than it being a kind of moral lesson. It might inspire us or frighten us, but it does not really *involve* us.

The bronze serpent connection, however, invites another reading: if the bronze snake takes the form of the sign of the sin, then the same applies to the cross. If the cross is the healing thing, it also indicates the sin itself: the very crucifixion. Who is saved by Jesus on the cross? Not "everybody", in a bland, generic sense, but those who put him there. It is the body broken *by* us which, by the grace of God, is the body God gives *for* us. Are *we* – us personally, not humanity in general – capable or even guilty of such things?

The principal difficulty with this understanding is that, for it to be true for us, *we have to be the destroyers of Jesus in order to be those who are reconciled through his cross.* As with our assessment of a story about a tiger in a lifeboat, so also here – we have an investment in our decision about the cross: what are we like?

But, framed in this way, this is an impossible thing to judge, for how do we know what we are like?

In fact, there is no knowing this before we choose how to account for the fact of Jesus' crucifixion. This is because there is a difference between the stories of the serpents in the desert and that of Jesus. In the desert the people suffer for their sin and cry out to God for healing. The sign of the snakes is interpreted by them as an obvious sign of sin, and this recognition *precedes* the experience of healing. The people cry out for healing *because* they have recognised their failure: "we have sinned."

This is not something a Christian can do because with the crucified Jesus it is the other way around. Unlike with the snakes and the bronze serpent, no one is aware of the true sinfulness of the crucifixion *until* Jesus is presented back to them in the resurrection as

saviour. The resurrection does not leave the cross behind, but gives it back to us as our fundamental involvement in the story of God with his people.

This leads to an extraordinary conclusion: *only the one who believes on the risen Jesus knows what it is to sin against him*. With Jesus, knowledge of sin *follows* belief, and does not come before it. This is why our prayers of confession generally follow the proclamation of the gospel. We don't believe in Jesus because we know that we are sinners; our sense for sin comes with our faith. This being the case, perhaps some sections of the church ought to talk less about sin, not because it doesn't matter but because it can't make gospel sense until Jesus arrives as liberator.

For God sent the Son *not* to condemn but to save, not to tear down but to build up, not to terrorise but to set at peace (3.17). The love of God for the world is a work which takes our having put Jesus on the cross – then, or in some like fashion today – and makes of that failure a *benefit* for us.

Those who believe come to the light (3.21) because their works are always seen in light of the fact that God has loved them *even to the cross*.

There is *life* here, and good news. It is not so much the freedom to be wrong as the confidence that, no matter *how* wrong we get, it is not beyond redemption in the hands of this God. And our work is to become like God in this respect – giving, forgiving, serving – that the way of God might increasingly become the way of God's people.

Let it be so.

May God bless us with greater understanding of how deeply we are loved, that we might become better lovers in return, for Christ's sake. Amen.
