

Lent 4
11/3/2018

Mark the Evangelist

Numbers 21:4-9
Psalm 107
John 3:14-21

Snake therapy

Sermon preached by Rev. Bruce Barber

“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”.

For obvious reasons most of us don't like snakes. We're not the first to have this reaction. Our forebears in the faith first had to contend with snakes in their wilderness wanderings. We hear that they were rebellious with their lot: *“Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?”* There is no food, no water. Then the story goes: the Lord sent poisonous serpents among them, and they bit the people and many died. Moses got the job of getting rid of them by making a bronze serpent, putting it on a pole, so that whenever a person was bitten they would look at the bronze serpent and live.

What do we make of that? Well, the story comes from a very early source in which magic and magical cures are prominent. But the form in which we have the story shows that it is now used to emphasize the capacity of a beleaguered people to discover a trust in Yahweh despite all appearances.

It is worth knowing not only that the snake was a well known reptile of the wilderness, but was, in fact, worshipped by many of the Hebrews' neighbouring tribes. The crucial thing to recognise, however, is that, unlike for us, the snake represented not only evil and destruction but also healing and hope. This symbol of the healing snake is still alive for us in what you might recall as the physician's symbol - once shown on a car's number plate - which shows the snake entwined around the wand of Esclepius, the god of healing. The symbol of the snake was also associated with the Greek god Hermes, the messenger god, who for the Romans became the god Mercury. A doctor in our not so distant past, who making home visits driving a Ford Mercury, was literally a god of healing!

To recognise this double significance of the snake is crucial, because only on this basis will we understand the gospel today: *“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 point is that Jesus now takes the place of the serpent. When the Gospel of John uses the phrase “lifted up” that is a synonym in the first place for the Cross. Somewhere else Jesus says: “I if I be lifted up from the earth will draw all people to me “. Hearing this it is almost certain that we will assume that this being lifted up refers to his resurrection or ascension. But for John being “lifted up” carries the powerful image of an immobile - but at the same time of a consenting - Christ, arms and feet pinned to the Cross, passively crucified, physically lifted off the ground by the imperial forces of Caesar with the connivance of the Jewish religious authorities. Immobile, but glorious in his immobility crying: *“It is accomplished”.*

So this “lifting up” carries the same twofold significance as does the bronze serpent. The man on the Cross, like the raised up serpent, represents not only evil and destruction, but also healing and restoration. Jesus is bitten by human poison, yet is at the same time the antidote of that poison.

However, though the texts appear to be similar, there is yet this significant difference. The ancient healing of the serpent benefitted only the immediate Hebrews, whereas the healing effected by the raising up of the Son of man is to be universal. This we are promised in the “whoever”: “*whoever believes in him may have eternal life*”, or perhaps the even better translation, “*whoever believes may have eternal life in him*”. The Hebrews had only to *look at* the bronze serpent to experience healing. The “whoever” – you, me, anyone – must also see, see now not with the eyes of the body since that is not possible because the lifting up of the physical cross is an event long lost in the mists of time. But we, too, must see – see with theological eyes. For John, this “lifting up” on the Cross is not for such eyes something that happened a long time ago in a far different place. Rather, the eyes of faith see the origin of the “lifting up” in the eternal love of God for his creation, and its intention as the healing of all who believe. For John, “to see” is in this sense “to believe”, and “to believe” is “to see” – really see in the very depths of what is happening here and now. What matters is what *is* happening *in the present act of believing*, not *what happened* however long ago.

How significant this insistence on the present is when we reckon with the fact that most people imagine that faith is about whether or not they can believe in the so-called facts of a long departed event. How can we get people to see this difference? In the final analysis, it is the basic task of mission today, yet it seems to be the hardest task of all. For our culture is mesmerised by the claim of facts, and as far as it understands Christian faith, past facts, once to believe them, increasingly to deny them.

This is why today’s text is so important. It could be as revolutionary in the 21st century as it was in the 2nd. What it offers is a gift that is open-ended. For the “whoever” is not merely someone else – it is held out again and again to contradict whoever has assumed that the decision of faith is something always to be settled once and for all. The “whoever” stands as a permanent potential destruction of the assumed gulf between insiders and outsiders. It calls in question all who have replaced the *act* of faith with a settled “belief”, whether that be positive or negative. That is to say, it calls in question all who are happier with the noun “belief” rather than the verb “to believe”. The gospel is always about verbs, not nouns. Nouns, you recall, describe a state or condition; verbs speak of action, always holding out a prospect of new possibilities.

Such we have here – whoever “believes”, not whoever “has” belief. We hear from time to time of someone who has, as the saying goes, “lost their faith”. What that really means is that they never had faith in the first place, since faith is something that, by the definition of the gospel, is not possible to lose. It simply ceases to inform one’s life.

Arguably the promise of this “whoever believes”, compared with the conventional view of belief as a noun, is responsible for so many indifferent, sad or angry people on the boundary. But it also might reassure anxious people at the very centre who, for example, unhappy with Creeds, are not quite sure if their belief is justified.

So it is salutary to have this text before us in Lent – this time of penitence and reflection. It brings the truth of God and the truth of our lives into a living union. “Who God is” is taken care of in the lifting up of the Son of man, in his own body imbibing our poison and achieving our healing. “Who we are” is taken care of in the “whoever” which invites us to this exchange in the always renewed act of faith, transforming the perishing, often poisoned, experience of our existence into a permanent offer of abundant life which nothing can harm.

So - have a renewed respect for snakes!
