

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

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Rector of St James

Fourth Sunday in Lent

(b-lent4)

11th March 2018

Readings: Numbers 21: 4-9; Psalm 107: 1-3, 17-22;
Ephesians 2: 1-10; John 3: 14-21.

“From Death to Life”

Stop the Snakes!

Looking at recent social media posts, it would seem that we Australians have a fascination for dangerous animals, snakes being of special significance. I've seen photos of snakes in showers and lunch-boxes, devouring cats and possums, and even fighting with crocodiles! This is perhaps because we have some of the most venomous snakes in the world. As a child, growing up on a farm, I was taught to have a healthy respect for snakes. “Don't try and touch them, don't kill them, don't run away, just give them a wide berth” my father would say; and it stuck.

The Bible tends to give snakes a lot of bad press. It begins with the Genesis creation stories where the 'serpent' is described as cunning and deceitful, and who dupes Eve into eating of the forbidden fruit and encouraging Adam to do likewise. But by eating of the fruit Adam and Eve gained 'knowledge of good and evil' - in other words, a conscience and freedom of choice.

Nevertheless, the narrative describes the consequences of this act, among other things, as including Adam and Eve being cast out of the garden of Eden, of having to work to live, and ultimately death. For the snake it was having to crawl on the ground and be at enmity with humans.

In the Ancient Near East, the serpent (or snake) had several mythological functions including matters of fertility, healing and magic. There are examples of statues, jewellery and charms depicting snakes for various religious purposes, and it was not a negative depiction.

When we get to today's reading from Numbers, the narrative presents the Hebrew people wandering in the wilderness on their journey from slavery in Egypt to the promised land in Canaan. The people are clearly not happy and contemplating rebellion because they feared that they would die because of lack of food and water.

‘Whinge, whinge, whinge’ they went; and could it get worse? It most certainly could, as they were infested with snakes, some of which bit people and causing them to die.

Predictably, the people cried out to God “Turn back the snakes!” But God did not turn back the snakes, instead he provided a cure. The people had to learn to live with the snakes as part of God’s creation and on whose ground they trod, but they could find healing by looking at the bronze snake on the pole that Moses had made. The people themselves had to act and be part of the solution.

It describes a God who is interested in humanity, but who does not take away the challenges of life. As I had to learn to live with snakes as a child, so too did the Hebrews in the wilderness; and if bitten, there was a cure if one chose to use it – “look at the bronze serpent on the pole”. The snake on the pole is still present with us today in the symbol for medical care, or *Rod of Asclepius*, which was an ancient Greek symbol for healing.

So, there is some ambiguity surrounding the image of the snake. The serpent could be cunning and deceiving, a cause of death, yet also a symbol of healing. Judaism never fully relegated the snake to the nether-world of Satan. Indeed, it wasn’t until the development of Medieval Christianity that the snake became a symbol of the devil, including the depiction of the Blessed Virgin Mary standing on a snake, as a reminder that she was the new Eve who reversed the effect of the snake in Genesis 3.

The New Healing

Jesus uses the symbol of Moses’ snake on the pole in his discussion with the Jewish leader Nicodemus. He described that the Son of Man will also be ‘lifted up’ on a pole that people may be able to look to him and receive spiritual healing and eternal life. In this way, Jesus identified with the symbol of the bronze snake – a symbol of healing.

Just as it was for those in the wilderness who had to look at the bronze statue, so too we must respond and act by looking to Jesus, who will bring peace, healing and enlightenment. This is an interesting parallel with the eating of the fruit of the tree of the ‘knowledge of good and evil’, which led to understanding, wisdom and discernment.

Of course, knowledge can be both a freeing and binding concept, depending upon how you approach it. As Jesus said in the gospel reading:

“...the light has 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. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

(John 3: 19b-21)

The important thing here is to want to be enlightened, thereby taking the risk of knowing good and evil, and subsequently choosing to do the good. It is a choice, but it also brings spiritual healing.

In baptism, therefore, we ask the following questions:

- Do you turn to Christ?
- Do you repent of your sins?
- Do you reject selfish living and all that is false and unjust?
- Do you renounce Satan and all evil?

On Easter Day we will have the opportunity of renewing our baptism promises including responding to these questions. In our preparation through Lent, it does us well to think about them and ask ourselves how we are going on the journey of faith. Are we in the wilderness encountering snakes? And do we look to Jesus on the cross for healing?

Changing the World

An old story goes:

“When I was young I wanted to save the world, so I prayed ‘God please intervene to stop the wars, feed the hungry, house the homeless, and heal the sick’; but I did nothing, and nothing seemed to change.

When I was middle-aged I realised it wasn’t working, so I prayed ‘God give me the strength to change those close to me’, but nothing seemed to change.

Now that I am old I pray ‘God give me the strength to change myself’ and at least I have changed. If only I had prayed this earlier!”

The fact of the matter is that when we change the world changes, and it is God who helps us to make this spiritual change. What we need to do is turn to Jesus, put our faith in his message of love, and God will then enter our hearts through his Holy Spirit to bring about healing and change.

This is what is meant in the Letter to the Ephesians:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.” (Ephesians 2: 8-10)

Prayer helps us to focus on what God wants for us, which is the good life as revealed in Jesus. The snakes will still be there on the journey, but we will be able to find a cure for their bite.