

Fourth Sunday in Lent Year B

The season of Lent is an overlay of the crisis moments in Jesus' ministry in Galilee and Jerusalem and the reasons behind the passion story. And for us, a mixture of reflection on that ministry as example: how are we to change in response?

Num 21: 4-9

One of the characteristic features of the accounts of the forty-years wandering in the wilderness is the people's reversions to "murmuring" - complaining about the privations of liberty! This theme is picked up in John chapter 6; the evangelist's desire to present Jesus as "the new Moses" is enhanced by his references to feeding in the wilderness, and to the people "murmuring".

Here, however, the people have moved beyond murmuring about poor food and inadequate water. Now they are in danger from poisonous snakes. Many died from snake bites. According to the text of Numbers, this is not a natural hazard, but a divine punishment for their murmuring. Following the attacks by snakes, the people repent, acknowledging that their murmurs amount to sin - a failure to trust God's provision for them. Moses intercedes on their behalf, and is ordered to make an image (?) of a poisonous snake, and hold it up so that all who see may be healed. The Hebrew word used here, incidentally, is from the same root as "seraph", which most readers, I suppose, take to be a kind of angel. In fact the *seraphim* figure in many religious practices in the Ancient Near East, representing healing and defence - and, in Egypt, destruction.

The Jerusalem temple contained a bronze serpent, named Nehushtan; it was destroyed by King Hezekiah.

This episode in ancient history is vividly recalled in John 3: 14-15, our gospel reading for today, where the lifting up of Jesus on the Cross is likened to the lifting up of the snake by Moses.

Ps 107: 1-3, 17-22

Take a look at the whole psalm. Its form is that of a hymn with a refrain which recurs four times: see vv 8-9; 15-16; 21-22; 31-32.

The theme of our extract is one of a people reaching the limits of their tolerance (see v18) as did the Israelites in the wilderness, of their repenting, and their being rescued.

Epistle Eph 2: 1-10

This theme of rebellion, repentance and rescue is picked up by Paul in this letter to the Christians in Ephesus. Although Ephesus was a city in its own right, in all probability this letter was addressed not to a single church community but to a group of geographically related church communities, analogous, perhaps, to a Methodist Circuit or an Anglican Deanery.

As with all the NT letters, we need to remember that here is a group of relatively recent converts. There are no venerable “pillars of the church”, who have led the community for many decades. Almost none came from Christian families. So Paul’s opening assertion “you were all dead in your trespasses and sins” (to which we in the 21st century might react with a “huh?”) was an all too accurate description of his readers. But this allows him to unfold once again the pattern of rebellion, repentance and rescue, which has all but dominated Christian preaching for most of the church’s history. This motif needs to be examined carefully by Christian preachers. Used injudiciously it can warrant precisely the attack on Christianity that suggests (see the poster campaign on busses) that being a Christian is to live in perpetual guilt and fear and misery.

The key verse, for many, is verse 8, where Paul sets out with the utmost clarity the principle of justification by faith – having one’s relationship with God put right not by frantic, fear-driven activity, but by trusting in God’s goodness.

Gospel John 3: 14-21

One of the most familiar of gospel readings, this neatly picks up the thread from the previous lections, but also leaves no room for anxiety about God’s motives. God does not wish to condemn but to save. God does not seek our grovelling misery, but our joy and our wholeness. Yes, honestly!!!

There is however a warning (vv18b-20) to any who are inclined to dismiss Jesus and to brush aside the gravity of the human condition. God’s love would not need to be demonstrated in this way if humanity in general and in particular were not in grave danger. Here is the great Christian dilemma. On the one hand the situation is grave; on the other hand the generosity of God overwhelms the danger. It is customary to refer to the danger in terms of God’s judgement and his love in terms of mercy. Many biblical passages and many hymns resound with these twin themes. Rather than quote from those sources, here are two clauses from the “Charge to the Ordinands” in the Methodist Presbyteral Ordination Service.

*As you exercise mercy, do not forget justice;
as you minister discipline, do not forget mercy.*

It is a balancing act worthy of Solomon to hold together these two apparently polar opposites, yet (as is stated earlier in the same service):

This ministry will make great demands upon you and upon those close to you, yet in all this, the Holy Spirit will sustain you by his grace.