

Sermon 15<sup>th</sup> March 2015 'Lifted Up' Numbers 21:4-9 Ephesians 2:1-10

March 13 2011

*Prayer: We lift up our hearts to you, O God, with thanksgiving for your steadfast love that saves and heals. Open us to new possibilities for living according to your purpose. Amen.*

Lent 4 – we are well on the road to the Cross of Easter with our Sunday reflections having perhaps a stronger focus on the health of our inner faith life than usual. This week we have been asked to base our reflections firstly on how the ancient people looked to a bronze statue of a snake on a pole, for health and life. Then from the letter to the Ephesians how we still have a choice of health and life – this time because it is Jesus lifted up; both times it is because of the compassionate love of God that mercy and grace are poured out to and for us – for our life.

Most commentators seemed to trust that when Jesus spoke of himself being lifted up as the symbol of life, he was basing the picture on this story from Numbers. It comes from when the people of God were 'between' lands. They had left Egypt behind – and we can hear that that enough time had passed so that they 'forgot' the terror of slavery / poverty / powerlessness /... and were only remembering the 'good-things' AND **not enough** time has passed in that they were still on the road to the Promised Land.

IN this 'in between' state they got 'impatient' and grumbled (again) about the travelling conditions... They forgot the miracle of the rescue from the best army in their world – (the drowning of the chariots of Egypt in the waters –of the returning red sea; they forgot the miracle of the bread (mana) and meat (quails) and water from the rock..... they didn't like the food!

Remember this is a people who have accepted the relationship and promises given by both sides to live within the rules (last week we looked at the 10 Words to live by) and here they are abusing their word and the '10 Words' and the other partner... and so in this context we hear how the partner caused / allowed an explosion in the venomous snake population.

What I want to emphasise today is that it is the people themselves who with reflection understand it to be a reaction from God because they first broke the relationship conditions – **"we have sinned"**. They turn back to Moses – (God's visible face), and ask for life. God once again provides a way through for his beloved people. They have accepted their part in creating the situation where God allowed the brokenness of the relationship to cause death, and accepted that it is a form of God's judgement they are facing in their illness and death – but as soon as they ask for health and life – it is given.

The snake statue is made and it represents health, life to all who look and believe what God could do **through it**. The bronze snake of itself is nothing – it points the way to the action of God in the lives of the people. And yes <sup>\*1</sup> 'Second Kings 18:4 tells us that some of the children of Israel completely missed the point and worshiped "the bronze snake Moses had made", naming it Nehushtan and burning incense to it. Israel's King Hezekiah, tore it down with a host of other idols 600 years after Moses'.

Again and again the people broke the relationship rules and again and again God in compassionate love and with grace offered life – until the final offer in Jesus at Easter. There is a warning here that we sometimes just might get short sighted with the death of Jesus and focus on the cross / the figure on the cross as our salvation.

Remember our salvation can be seen as the restoration of our health – "salve" – to heal? The healing of our life and soul is when we are fully restored to the right relationship with our creator God, and that happens we say through the Cross of Easter – through the life Jesus gave up. It is not a wooden torture frame nor a human body nailed to it. It is because of **who was in Christ enabling** him to be the way of our healing and the Christ who accepted why he was on earth.

The life we are offered is not only in the now – as it was for the ancient people looking at a bronze snake, but also for us it is life *forever more*. Eternal life is ours by faith, because Jesus was lifted up for us to see and believe God was in Him for us and our salvation. cV

*It is I think*, sometimes hard to hold different levels of meaning together at the same time, but we do it more often than we realise. Here we have one level of meaning of life in faith terms = (1) life because we have been restored in God through Christ. Then we have (2) life eternally, that I think actually begins here and now; it is dimly seen in us that *which will one day* be fully seen! To *poorly* rephrase St Paul! So life now and forever in faith language AND then (3) we have the level from Ephesians today.

Ephesians started our reflections on a discussion about life **and death**. More than ‘life’ in Jesus when we come to faith in him, more than life eternally, not having faith means being **dead!** St Paul is trying to paint the picture that when we live without Christ we are dead. When we live in worldly ways we are not living in God’s ways and therefore we are not in good health, not alive-in-God. It is strong language to make us think! To rephrase <sup>\*2</sup>for us might be to say that Paul was trying to explain how to live under destructive, dominant even poisonous powers is no life, is not life but we all accept it one way or another.

He wants us to move from this place into **God’s place** and links this ‘move’ from death to life with the death and resurrection of Jesus. Those who recognise worldly death, see it at work on themselves and in themselves (including in their group, family, community and nation), and in Jesus have a chance to move from it to life. The being of God, the Christ, Jesus is the gift which enables people that choice, accept the offer of life, leaving ‘death’ and its poisonous influence behind or remain ‘dead’ – now and always.

Another scholar <sup>\*3</sup> put it this way: “The big question for us this week is whether we will admit our need of health and salvation and recognise the poison that is destroying us, our communities, our economies and our planet – **or not?** *Like the Israelites*, it’s easy to look at the hardships of the world and long for the “good old days”, forgetting that those are the very days that brought us to this place. It’s easy to want what we don’t have and complain that God isn’t “fixing” everything the way we want God to. What is much harder is to acknowledge our culpability in the breakdown of our world’s systems.

It’s hard to face the way our greed and consumerism has brought suffering to others, and has put strain on our economic systems and on our planet. It’s hard to recognise that our addiction to credit, to fossil fuels, and to immediate gratification has had destructive consequences. It’s hard to release our sense of entitlement, of exceptionalism, and to stop justifying our narcissism....

**But, until** we are willing to do this, we will not find the healing we seek. *Even more* is that we live in a world where denial has become a global pre-occupation, so that true repentance requires great courage and great humility. It may be naive to believe that widespread repentance can happen in our world, but as small groups of people begin to take responsibility for their part in their struggles, begin to dream of a different world, honestly repent and commit to the “good works” of justice, simplicity, generosity, inclusivity and love, even in small ways, some measure of healing will be found. **The choice is ours.**

In God’s place healing is found, through God’s ways life is found and in making the choice for life and health **we discover** the God who again and again creates ways to bring this choice before us. Mercy and Grace are forever driving God’s agenda. *Not* so that we might take advantage and repeat our mistakes, but that as we are offered life, we turn to offer life to others. Or in Paul’s words to us today - <sup>8</sup> For it is by **grace** you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the **gift of God**-- <sup>9</sup> not by works, so that no one can boast. <sup>10</sup> For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to **do good** works,...” Made alive to do good – Lifted up out of the darkness, destruction and poison of a worldly place to do good, bring health and life – that’s why we’re in God’s place. cV

**Mercy and Grace** pouring out of our God in love, lifted up the bronze snake for healing and life. *Mercy and Grace* pouring out of our God in love, lifted up Jesus on the cross for healing and life. **Now** it is our turn, from God’s place that having been lifted up, **to lift all others up** that they might see and live. Amen.