

Lent 4
26/03/2006

Mark the Evangelist

Numbers 21: 4-9
Psalm 107
Ephesians 2:1-10
John 3:14-21

The Serpent and the Cross

Mid-Lent Sunday is usually one, which allows for a little relaxation of the pre-Easter discipline. Nevertheless the readings are full of rich ideas which are far from frivolous. For the last two weeks our graphic has been of the cross, a serious symbol. Today we have an associated image, drawn from the book of Numbers: the bronze serpent Moses made to hold up in wilderness. This symbol has links with Greek mythology and is used by the medical profession. In Christian tradition the serpent nearly always has pagan or idolatrous associations. And the serpent is the evil, crafty one that distracted Adam and Eve from the will of God, leading to the death of sin and its associated curses. The Hebrew scriptures imagined a day when the serpent would no longer be a threat, as in the prophetic vision of a renewed world in which a child would play over the nest of the adder. In Christian thought the power of sin and death, symbolized by the serpent, is finally overcome through the Incarnation. This is why Mary is sometimes depicted with her foot on the head of a snake, and some of the Apostles were bitten by snakes and lived.

The Wilderness was the place where the faith of the people was put to the test. It was a place for snakes, and had great potential for sin and death because the question was, would the people serve God or not. The poisonous fiery serpents were a response to the peoples' failure to stay aligned with the purposes of God. But all was not lost. Moses interceded and, for their healing, made an image of a serpent, which had sacramental power. Notice how the repugnant sign of judgement and death became the antivenene. It had the shape, but not the venom. To the eyes of faith it was an efficacious symbol of healing and life. The people were called to look and live; to turn away from their distractions and back to God, and where there had been death and loss, there was recovery and life.

For John the bronze serpent is a typology, which anticipates the saving power of God's love for the world revealed in Jesus Christ. It forms a preface to his meditation on God's love in which neither the cross nor the resurrection, are mentioned as such. But this is highly nuanced writing. It is the connection John makes between the lifting up of the serpent and the lifting up of the Son of Man that evokes the image to render new meaning. In place of Moses who interceded, there appears Jesus Christ. John's witness is that faith begins with God's great gift of love for the world revealed in the one whom God lifts up for us, in death and life. Here we are given something, beyond what we possess, in which to anchor our confidence. Faith yields the gift of eternal life, which in John means sharing now the fullness of life that flows from a renewed God-relationship. John is emphatic: this is for light and life, not condemnation or darkness, and we are invited to re-centre ourselves around this gift.

In the Wilderness the serpents seem like judgement actively expressed. But this is not so in John. Judgement comes in passive form. We are loved with a love that refusal does not cancel. But refusal may mean we do not enter into its benefits. The irony is the place we need to look to find what is on offer, is marked by the cross. A dark and repugnant symbol that hardly seems something full of life and light and love.

In language that is elegant, lofty and complex, Ephesians confirms John's view: God is rich in mercy. Even when we were turned away and lost, God gifted us with new life. The author of Ephesians draws on a Baptismal Hymn to picture God's dying and rising love for us, and the Christian community living in the power of resurrection life. Because of God's willingness to suffer humiliation for us, the church already knows profound acceptance, deep relatedness and entirely unexpected newness of life. This means sin, the power of self-absorption - the spirit that competes with God - has been broken from God's side. But Ephesians also knows that Christian life is not one of being perpetually intoxicated by the heavenly realms. The cross is still before us. Death is still a reality and we still struggle with the challenge of what it means to live in God and to do good works.

These texts touch a deep place in our foundational story. Unless a person has entered into the reference points of the Christian faith it is very difficult to make sense of the ideas here, and yet they lie at the very heart of the matter.

The question is, how are we to live? Firstly: in the power of knowing the greatness of the love with which we are loved. Secondly, in looking to the sign of that love, and living by its pattern of self-giving. To look to this sign is to realise that it contains the sign of our problem and our healing. Life is to be found in confronting the very thing that seems to threaten our life. In this respect the cross may seem like a friend and an enemy. We may never be free from wrestling with what that means. On this journey there are points of danger. Like the people in the Wilderness the church can become impatient, and frustrated with its leaders, and with God. The message is that the very thing, which poisons us may be the thing we need to look to if we are to find the way ahead. We must then consider what it means to look and live. At the moment the church worldwide is impatient over the question of sexuality and ministry and the level of frustration is likely to poison our life and split apart what the mercy of God has joined together. To live by the pattern of the cross may mean realising that the events of the present are a call to look deeply into the question of sexuality, and to seek from this unexpected place new forms of healing for our life together.

We may choose to live by the pattern of the cross on a different level. Someone who was part of the protests about Uranium mining said that Aboriginal people believed digging up uranium would release serpents into the world. We hardly need reminding of this at present, and if you have seen the documentary on the storage of nuclear waste you will realise how apt the idea is. Many need the energy, but how do we contain the venom uranium is capable of spewing out into the world. Can we find ways for Uranium to be something that preserves life rather than brings death to many? One thing we can be clear about is, the pattern of the cross leads to a way ahead that is marked by sacrifice, life and love.

The cross has been long been venerated by the church and it has taken many forms. It remains central because it witnesses that God does not turn away from the deepest pain and darkest hours we know, but chooses to be found there, for us. God is revealed to us through suffering - the place we find to be ultimately threatening. But to the eyes of faith the cross, which has the shape of suffering and death, has lost its venom. By grace

and the richness of God's mercy, it has become a sign of healing and life, a sign of hope for all people.