

Fourth Sunday of Lent

18th March 2012

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

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen

The readings this week seem to have gone off on a tangent from the previous Lent readings over the last three weeks. Just as were getting used to the idea of 'covenant' and exploring the relationship and interaction between Divinity and Humanity, (what used to be known as God and Man), we have poisonous snakes thrown into the mix. It has, however, been delightful to share in the Lent groups and to discover together a mosaic of meaning and some real questions for ourselves as we seek to find a way toward the realisation of Easter.

Before looking at the readings themselves let's take a minute or two to appreciate what we're looking at. A simple question – what does a Bee do? 'Make honey' and 'pollinate plants' are two of the most obvious answers, and they are also answers that tell us something of the importance of Bees. However, what if we asked the Bee itself what it does? The answer might be quite different and might be more like: I am busy everyday and all day, I spend all my time looking for food and bringing it back to feed the queen who then supplies me with sweet food in return. The Bee is unaware of the life giving part it plays in relation to the wider world.

Now, if we can see ourselves as Bees - busy everyday and all day, spending all our time looking for food, or rather working to enable us to buy food and things, and then bringing what we have earned or gathered back to feed the family and the tax man who then supplies us with enough to eat and enjoy in return. We might also appreciate that we too live mostly unaware of the life giving part we play in relation to the wider world.

The scriptures, the prophets, Christ and the Church are all there to invite us to see something more, and to have a fuller appreciation of the universe and of all that is, seen and unseen. We can therefore approach the scriptures not with a knowing of what we will find, but rather with a sense of finding more than we can imagine. The bee would have a hard time understanding our appreciation of pollination and would be surprised to know that we feed on the very same stuff that the queen prepares for all the bees. Likewise we must wrestle with understanding and suspend our ingrained notions, in order to more fully open ourselves to the unimaginable that the writers of the scriptures glimpsed and sought to share with us and with all.

As we look at our fourth Lent readings we come to them with the previous three covenant stories still echoing for us: the covenant with Noah, the covenant with Abraham and Sarah and the covenant through Moses. Perhaps we expected these covenants to lead us into something more on this fourth Sunday, but instead we're left contemplating poisonous serpents! Maybe we have made a return to Eden, the place where the decision of life is made after advice from another serpent.

With the narrative of the first reading we are brought into a place of confusion, and apparent conflict. We are drawn, like the participants in the narrative into a questioning of the previous covenants. Was that the intention of the writer? Are we now being asked to more realistically engage the process of covenant?
"the people became impatient on the way"
"The people spoke against God and against Moses"
and of course when disaster struck them they asked Moses to pray for their salvation.

We should not have difficulty relating to this scenario, and so should find an entry point that puts us into the narrative. We can relate to how the people felt as they wandered, and most of us will also have empathy with their impatience. It a bit like how the bees must feel when there is a drought and few plants in flower. And it is in such moments (days) that we are so easily reoriented to the fulfilment of sensate-driven activity. We lose sight of the wider life purpose and of the creative part we have been given in that life purpose. We need a sign to give us once again our true orientation. And so we come to the bronze serpent on a pole.

First let me read again verse 4 and 5 from last week's Old Testament reading:
4 You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. 5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them;

And so we come to that place of confusion, and apparent conflict! Remember the bees, and seek to look beyond the obvious.

Moses uses the very symbol of death to provide a reorientation. It is death itself that we must look away from in this world - that is, the poisonous serpents on the ground - and look toward the sign of death that draws us into health and wholeness. And that same sign is revealed again in the Easter passion of Christ – as it was revealed in Genesis by the words of truth spoken by the serpent in the garden.

We can imagine the words of Paul in his letter to the Ephesians, being the very same words that Moses uttered as he raised the bronze serpent on its pole.
You were dead through the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once lived..... 4 But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us 5 even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ

And John in today's gospel underlines the same understanding;

the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

There is so much to be understood here, so much that has been glimpsed by the writers of these narratives and at the same time so much that has been ignored, distorted or rejected. If we turn away from the poisonous serpents of this world, toward that which is raised up in death, we will be healed, made whole and find life.

If we can turn from *following the course of this world* we can find that *we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works.* And if we can see the truth of the Easter passion then we might realise that *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.*

And now imagine if what you do can be seen as having been done in God - God is made real by your life and your living, the light coming into the darkness through you. This is what is hard for the Bees to understand. We have an opportunity: Lent is the pathway that is leading us into that opportunity and into another reality.

Stay with it, Refreshment Sunday could equally be called opt-out Sunday. Let today's readings encourage you to stay with it. Seek Easter, make a friend of Death, in fact raise it upon a pole and look toward it, for there lies resurrection.

The Lord be with you.
Peter Humphris