

Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> March, 2018  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent - Year B

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

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

The faith that we profess as Christians is not, generally speaking, one that could be described as an *intellectual* thing; not just a set of propositions or rules to be followed. Sure, we do have some things that say what “we believe” - we use some form of the Creed in every Sunday morning service here - but our faith is not usually lived out in our heads.

Bishop N.T. Wright - known to most as “Tom”, tells the following story.

*“I sat for two hours with a young man who could not believe in God’s love. When I say “could not”, that is quite literally how it seemed. He could not believe in God’s love in much the same way that he was physically incapable of running a mile in three minutes or lifting a car off the ground with his bare hands.*

*It wasn’t that he couldn’t understand what I was saying. Nor had he thought through a set of logical arguments that demonstrated to his mental satisfaction that either there wasn’t a God or, if there was, that he couldn’t be a God of love. It was, with the distressing predictability that clergy and counsellors know only too well, that deep down in his memory and imagination there was a sense of unlovedness; of family and teachers telling him he was no good; of being made to feel inferior, stupid, weak. So, the capacity to receive love, to feel love, to understand love, had been covered over as though with a thick, leathery, calloused skin.”*

I am still getting to know you all, so it’s not as if I can speak with any great conviction here, but my suspicion is that this story will ring true, to one degree or another, to most

of you here today. I know that it certainly does for me - that at times in my life, even when I have apparently been surrounded by family and friends who might say otherwise - I have felt unloveable. I have felt that I am not worthy of receiving people's attention and affection. And that there is *certainly* no way that I was worthy of receiving God's love.

It is at times such as these that the truth of today's Gospel passage is most important - you might say that it contains the bedrock of our faith. But perhaps because we have heard it so often we miss its significance. "For God so loved the world, he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

Perhaps, like me, this was the first Bible verse you ever learned. It is certainly the most well known of all Scripture. But in those times when we feel unloveable; in those times when we are sitting in the dark places of others, perhaps we need to hear afresh that promise that is sometimes so familiar we miss it.

"This is how much God loved the world", writes John - "so much that God gave his only Son, his special Son." And why? So that the world might be saved - not condemned. We, the creation, the created order, we mean so much to our Creator God that his desire is that we be saved; that we know ourselves as valuable, and loved, and loveable.

But, we might reasonably ask, how? How does the act of God sending this Son into the world save it. Because if we are honest, at times, it can look like an almost futile gesture. In a sense, John's entire Gospel is the answer to this question, but today's passage gives us a clue as to how. It's a cryptic clue, granted, but here it is: "just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." The background story to this is told in our first reading from Numbers - a story which seems decidedly odd. Moses is leading the people through the wilderness to the Promised Land... and they're at it again...

grumbling! As a consequence, disaster strikes in the form of a plague of poisonous snakes. The people are dying from their bite.

And yet again, as has happened numerous times before, they run to Moses begging him to intercede with God, (the same God they've been grumbling about), to save them. On God's instructions Moses makes a bronze replica of the snakes that are afflicting them, and puts it high on a pole. Whenever anyone is bitten, they only need go to the pole and (literally) fix their gaze upon the snake... and they live. When they pay attention to that which has wounded them, God's saving grace is released within them, and they are healed.

This Old Testament story is one which the writer of John uses in today's gospel. But a little context first... John's Gospel handles the crucifixion differently to Matthew, Mark and Luke. Where their language dwells on suffering and death, John concentrates on the healing and liberating power of the cross, that he describes as God's *glory*. In today's gospel, Jesus says to the enquirer Nicodemus, that "just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up."

The words 'lifted up' refer to the crucifixion - they call to mind that moment when after the victim is nailed to the beams as it lies flat on the ground, the cross is hauled into the upright position, lifting the body high into the air... like the bronze snake pinned to the top of a pole. A modern paraphrase (by Nathan Nettleton) of the Greek amplifies John's meaning. "You know the old story from the desert: the one about Moses lifting up the hand-made snake so that the people could look at something to focus their trust in God. Well, the Human One is going to be lifted up for much the same reason. Everyone who looks up at him in trust and hope will receive life without limit."

As it was with the snake, so it is with the cross. When we fix our gaze upon the wounded body of Christ on the cross, we are healed... God's grace is released in us and we are ushered into new life.

No further explicit information is given to us - neither in Numbers, nor in John, as to *how* this is the case. This is no intellectual exercise in explaining how one thing logically leads to another - it is all that we can say that it *does* work - that God has given us the remedy to death - how, like the Israelites in the desert, we claim a faith that says God has given the solution to the problem - “so that all who believe”. So that everyone who believes; so that *anyone* who believes...

Perhaps this is the most important learning of our Lenten journey - maybe it is the *only* one that really matters - a belief that says, in those times when we find ourselves unloveable, that the meaning of the cross overshadows all; that in Christ lifted high on the cross we escape the condemnation that so often drags us down.

All through Lent and Holy Week we hear the invitation to co-mingle our personal human story with the story of Jesus Christ. We say in worship, “By his wounds we are healed”... “He carries our burden on the cross.” Theologically we are saying that in Christ Jesus, God gathers up all the tortured history of humanity, including yours and mine, and deals with it... heals it... redeems it... sets it free for life. And rather than trying to understand it in our heads, we are invited to literally and imaginatively place our life story into Christ’s story. To look upon the cross and see wounded humanity up there... to see our wounded battered life.

Christ’s story is universal, for he is the Human One. His wounded body is big enough to carry our pain and suffering too - all that burdens us... everything... for nothing is too terrible... nothing too shameful. We are invited to see it. Because our faith is this - that if we are prepared to die with Christ, we will also be resurrected with him. This is the truth and the promise of our faith - everyone who looks up at the Human One lifted high on the cross, may be set free... unleashed in the grace of God for life.

In the name of God. Amen.