

Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> March, 2021 - Fourth 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...

One of the things that happens during Lent in some churches is that many of the symbols and items around the building are shrouded in cloth for the period of the season. Commonly, it's any crosses or crucifixes; even the processional cross in some cases will be wrapped in cloth - either purple or black.

And this can be done for the whole season, or some just do it for Holy Week. Some places even go to the trouble of shrouding everything in purple for the first 5 weeks of Lent, and then in black for the final week, just to make the point even more stark.

There is also a liturgical practice that Baptisms should not be performed in Lent. Some of this thinking, I'm sure, is a historical throw-back to the very intentional focus of the season of Lent on Catechism; teaching about the Christian faith, for those who were to be baptized on Easter Day.

And there is something incredibly special, no doubt, to be actually baptized at the Easter service, especially the Easter Vigil, as the service begins traditionally in darkness, and then heralds the joy of the coming light as the Gloria is sung for the first time in 6 weeks, and the proclamation "Christ is Risen" rings out, and the new Christian is welcomed through baptism.

Yet, as I reflected this week on the readings today - especially the reading from Numbers and the Gospel passage, I was struck by the references and relevance to baptism contained within them; and found myself wondering whether they suggest a re-thinking of the practice of baptism in Lent; as we are faced with the ever-present image of the cross, and a call to re-orientate our lives.

Although we on our Lenten journey are nearing Jerusalem and the garden of Gethsemane and Golgotha, today's reading is from early in John's gospel and in a sense is still part of the prologue to the gospel and setting the theological stage for what John believes are the great themes of the life and meaning of Jesus. There are at least three important things happening this week.

The one primary image of Jesus lifted up on the cross speaks to two of those. Firstly, we look back to the wilderness story of the bronze serpent being lifted up so that those who had been bitten could look upon the lifted up image and be saved. And in this there is a foreshadowing of Jesus the resurrected one being lifted up in his return to the heavenly realms. And there is the continuing theme of Jesus as the light of the world.

This sense of the light is important in the Baptismal service - we light a candle for the one being baptised (always lit from the Paschal Candle as the symbol of life and light). But it is also an important image for us in our own lives - to follow the light. To walk in the light.

Without wanting to be a spoiler for this week's Lenten Study, Bishop Jeremy refers to the story of Nicodemus (which immediately precedes the excerpt that is our Gospel passage for today) and how he becomes a model of what light and life, truth and faith might look like; a journey from hiding in the shadows to tentative first steps in faith, to an act of witness.

And I imagine that is what it is like for many if not most of you - a journey. Never quite feeling as though we have arrived; never quite *there* (wherever there actually is). And so the cross becomes a focal point for us on our journey.

The incarnation - the life and witness of Christ is a source of light for us. But Jesus dying on the cross is the focal point of our salvation. This 'saves' us not simply because some sort of transaction was done between God and humanity but because like the bronze serpent lifted up in the wilderness, when we are in sin and suffering we can look to Jesus the Christ lifted up on the cross and see life being won even in the grip of death, love triumphing against all the powers of hate, hope prevailing in the presence of despair.

Being orientated to the light of Christ is not simply some vague hope of better times and a little more light in our life. Rather, it is a moment by moment choosing of life, love and hope even in the most appalling and difficult of circumstances. In this way we participate in our own salvation not simply receive it from on high. John does not emphasise judgement but rather reassures us that Jesus the Christ came to save.

In Lent, as we intentionally enter into the story of Christ, and as we figuratively journey with him through Holy Week, by our liturgies and our reflection, this source of hope and light is paramount.

To look to Christ is not to deny pain and suffering in our lives, but rather to have the eyes of faith to see the flickering light that shines in the darkness, to see the signs of God's grace and goodness in our lives, and to recognise the neighbour in our midst.

To turn to the light is to turn toward our true home: God. At its simplest this is what the Easter journey is - a turning toward our true home, a journeying deeper into the God who created and fully inhabits the real world we live in.

It is, I believe, as TS Elliot says: “We must not cease from exploration. And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we began and to know the place for the first time.”. In other words, our Lenten journey is a microcosm of our whole life journey, as we find that we are travelling to where we began - into the loving embrace of the creator who has always loved us and loves us still.

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

Amen