

Sermon

Sunday 14 March 2021

Lesson

Numbers 21: 4 – 9

In our lesson this morning we are treated to the vivid mythology of fiery serpents, a wrathful god, and the seemingly magical properties of a serpent made of bronze! As the Hebrew people made their way through the wilderness, they tired of life's journey, of its trials and hardships, and complained to God, 'Why have you brought us up from Egypt to die in the desert?' With hearts full of hatred, the people said that they loathed the manna God had given them. On the face of it, God returned spite for spite: God 'sent' venomous snakes, fiery serpents, among the people. Many were bitten and died. As more and more of their kin die, the people pleaded with God to rid them of the snakes. Moses made a bronze serpent, placed it high on a standard, and told the people that all who looked up to it, set their eyes upon it, would be healed. Honestly, what are we to make of this?

The symbolism of snakes or serpents was a familiar feature of ancient cultures. In Greek mythology, the Gorgon Medusa had hair made of hissing snakes; she could turn to stone anyone who looked at her. In Egypt, the Pharaoh wore an amulet of an upreared cobra on his forehead, a symbol of kingship and divinity. It was said to protect him from the snake's bite. In Jewish and Christian mythology, in the Garden of Eden, it was the serpent which first tempted Eve. When Jesus commissioned His disciples to go to the towns and villages, He told them to be as 'wise as serpents, and gentle as doves'. In John's Gospel, Jesus said that He, the Son of Man, will be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. In Christian art, snakes are sometimes used as a symbol of redemption, renewal and resurrection because each year a snake's skin sloughs off and the snake is renewed. What might the story of the fiery serpents in the wilderness mean for us?

Some may read the story literally. For me, it is a creative piece of writing, a faith narrative, and a story which carries spiritual meaning. Who could trust in a god that sent venomous snakes to hurt and kill

women, children and men? What sort of demon is that god?

Between the Old Testament and the New Testament, there is a collection of books which date from that intertestamental period.

These books are included in the Roman Catholic Bible, but not the Bible of the Protestant churches. Let's be ecumenical! In one of those books, *The Wisdom of Solomon*, the story of Moses, the venomous serpents and the bronze serpent is retold. The snakes again appear and attack the people, but this time they are not *sent* by God; they are simply a reality of the wilderness. The rabbis erased the sense that the snakes were the agents of God or a punishment handed out by a wrathful God. No one, it seems, likes the idea of a God that sends fiery, biting snakes!

For me, this change in the retelling of the story means that, in the Jewish and Christian traditions, we do not say that the bad things, the hurts and sufferings that happen to us are sent by God. God does not send snakes, or cancers, or accidents, or ill health of any sort. These things are features of the cosmos, not divine interventions.

The astrophysicist, Dame Jocelyn Bell Burnell, is a Quaker. In her book, *Broken For Life*, Burnell faces the difficult and delicate question of suffering. She says that religious people tend to have two assumptions: God is loving, and God is in charge of the world. She says, as a scientist, she examines assumptions. In the case of suffering, Burnell believes the second assumption is mistaken. Boldly, she says that, ‘Human beings will never grow up unless we have a God who stands back’. We may or may not agree with Burnell but, within the Jewish and Christian traditions, we may say that God does not send snakes. The question for us, for rational and moral decision-makers, is how we respond to the snakes, to the suffering?

What of the healing that came from looking up to the elevated bronze serpent? We would say, surely, that such a belief was superstitious. Over this past year or so, as the entire human population has faced COVID-19, we have looked to the genius and talents of medical scientists and the productivity of pharmaceutical companies for salvation, for our healing. Precious few will have scoured Ayr

searching for a bronze serpent! In truth, however, the story of the bronze serpent has long been interpreted to mean that healing comes from gazing upwards: spiritual healing comes as we gaze towards the Father, into the Mystery of God. It is a story of spiritual healing; it is God who offers inner healing. If we suffer from a physical or mental illness (as adults or as children), rightly, we should seek medicine from trained health professionals. But what is medicine for the soul?

In the Church of Scotland, one of the giants of our tradition is the late Donald Baillie. In his sermon on the religious life, Baillie said that we cannot be religious all of the time. We have duties to which we must attend: a teacher must teach, a gardener must dig the soil, and a parent must attend to the delightful and demanding needs of a child. All that is inescapable. Jesus and His disciples, surely, had to work in order to eat and live. But Baillie wrote:

To go off in the early morning to a quiet hillside spot for prayer seemed to [His] disciples such a novel thing. I suppose the reason why Jesus chose the hillside was partly because no privacy or solitude was possible in one of those tiny village houses of the Galilean peasants, and partly perhaps because Jesus found it easier to lift

up His heart to God in the open air and under the open sky, for He was a lover of nature. But the reason why He did the thing at all was because He knew by experience that without that way of beginning the day, without that periodic interval of devotion, it is impossible to keep on living in a religious spirit amid the distractions of the world.

In what ways do you look to the Father? What might be your bronze serpent? Fresh air as a sacrament of the Holy Spirit? The peace or passion of our hymns? A meditation: perhaps you too can sit for a moment in the home of Mary, Lazarus and Martha? This is a Bible I first used when I was a teenager. It has wonderfully dramatic and colourful paintings printed in it: Daniel in the lions' den, Jesus walking on water, and Jesus carrying the cross to Golgotha. Not surprisingly, I remember as though yesterday reading the twenty-third psalm. Without realising it, I read it as a love song; a moment of intense intimacy with the Sacred: it was as if God and I sat alone and I had the whole of God's attention:

The LORD is my shepherd: I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
He leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul.

Where do you read Scripture: in a quiet room, seated in your favourite chair or sitting up in bed?

Amen.