

September 14th 2008 The cross - The tree of life

Jn 3:13-17

Num 21:4-9

*Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*

Some of my best conversations have been **at night**, whether it is in bed, or in a tent, or walking home from the pub. When Nicodemus came to Jesus **he was in the dark**, both in the sense of the time of day, and in his confusion as to who Jesus was. Happily for us, St John allows us to eavesdrop on their conversation. Luther called what we hear 'the gospel in miniature'. **If we are in the dark too, it may shed some light for us.** I am going to speak (1) about the serpent, (2) about Jesus lifted up on the cross, and (3) about our response to the cross.

### *1. Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness*

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a man who was intimately acquainted with the Old Testament, and so would have been receptive to Jesus using a story about Moses. In the book of Numbers the Israelites, wearied by the long hard trek in the desert are having a grumble to their tour operator, particularly singling out the dreadful food. God punishes them by sending poisonous biting snakes, which are actually lethal. This is effective in renewing their sense of perspective, and we have fewer moans about the manna. When Moses intercedes, God provides a way of healing. Moses has to lift up a bronze snake on a pole. Those who are bitten have but to look at it, and live. The NT writers loved to find what we call types in the OT, stories or symbols which foreshadowed what was to come. Here we have the people in darkness; discontentment, danger and even death, eyes down avoiding the snakes. Then in God's merciful provision, they have to look up, and what do they see but a dreaded snake. Aagh! but this time they are healed. To quote from our collect, 'The instrument of painful death is the means of life and peace'.

### *2. Just... so must the Son of Man be lifted up*

When Jesus spoke about the Son of Man he meant himself. He compares his death on the cross to the bronze snake being lifted up. Nicodemus would not have realised that at the time, but people since have found it a useful parallel. The venerable Bede in a homily thirteen centuries ago wrote:

*'Our Lord, who came in the likeness of sinful flesh, is rightly portrayed as the bronze serpent because as the bronze serpent was the same as the fiery serpents except that it contained no poisonous or hurtful fire, and when it was raised up it healed those bitten by serpents. So also the Redeemer of humankind clothed himself not in sinful flesh, but in the likeness of sinful flesh, in which, by suffering death on the cross, he delivered those who believe in him from all sin and even from death itself.'*

*Therefore as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up; for as those who looked at the bronze serpent set up as a sign were for a time healed of the physical death and injury produced by the serpents' bites, so also those who look at the mystery of the Lord's passion, believing, confessing, and*

*sincerely imitating him, are saved completely and for ever from the death of both soul and body which they had incurred through sin.’ (Homily 11, 18: CCL CXXII, 31517)*

On this occasion what struck me was that the Israelites do not find their own solution to their plight, but God provides a way. Again on the cross, God gives his only Son to the people who are perishing, not for condemnation but salvation. They are to look up, see Jesus on the cross, and be saved.

3. Just as...*that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.*

*Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that....* So that what? what difference does it make to me? the pragmatists like me are waiting agog ...so that ....*whoever believes in him may have eternal life.* It is still religious-speak, which needs decoding. In St John’s gospel eternal life begins now - we don’t have to wait till we are dead. We have a choice; we could just look away from Jesus on the cross, (and check out other snake-bite antidotes on the internet). If we ‘believe’ we can respond to the cross with our hearts, and our minds, and in our actions.

**The response of the heart** is seen in the devotional use of crosses. This is when we look, we gaze, we contemplate, we may sing, and for some of us that is enough. The love of God is revealed, faith is kindled, and we are touched, transformed by a holy mystery. At the millenium people flocked to Seeing Salvation, a big exhibition in London, inspired by looking at visual representations of the cross.

**The response of the mind** occurs in thinking and arguing and working out doctrines of salvation and atonement - how exactly does Jesus’ death mean we are saved? We want to explain the truth, and enter the theological debates which Nicodemus or St Paul or Martin Luther would have relished. Bible studies, articles or books or lectures can help us to gain understanding. Alpha course or other groups.

**The response of our bodies** is to live the way of the cross, with our hands and feet and tongues, in what we do and say. Because of what Jesus has shown us, we will not shrink from suffering and death, from sacrifice, believing in the power of God to transform the ugly for good.

To move from darkness to light, we need to respond to the cross on all these levels, with our hearts, our head and our hands.

### *Conclusion*

To conclude; here in church and in Christian Europe, we are surrounded by crosses. Here at St Andrew’s we have a new one in the sanctuary. Those of us who are baptised have been signed with the cross; it is there even if it is invisible. We may mark ourselves, with the cross, our heart or mind or lips.

Those crosses will be empty of meaning, and will not dispel our darkness, unless they remind us of Jesus lifted up, so that we may believe in him and receive life.