
Sunday 14th March – the 4th Sunday of Lent: Mothering Sunday

Readings: Numbers 21:4-9 & John 3:14-21

Numbers 21:4-9

The bronze snake

They travelled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go round Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!'

Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, 'We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us.' So Moses prayed for the people.

The Lord said to Moses, 'Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.' So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.

John 3:14-21

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

Reflection

What a challenging choice of readings for Mothering Sunday! Except that strictly speaking, they're not! These are the readings for today, the 4th Sunday of Lent! When I realised this, I could have changed my mind and gone for the alternative listing; but I'd already got drawn in by the story of the grumbling Israelites and the snake on the pole; and the more I thought about it, the more I felt God wanted me to stick with this one!

The Israelites remind me of long car journeys with my own children, when the cry would go up almost as soon as we had left the house, "Are we nearly there yet?" It didn't help that the car was always packed to the gunwales; there was hardly room to move; the sun was usually beating in; and in those days, we didn't have any air conditioning! It didn't take long before they began to bicker amongst themselves. But I soon found a strategy that worked. If it was safe to do so, I would pull over and without a word, simply stop the car. The first time I did this it took them a minute or two to realise we weren't moving! Eventually, one of them asked what I was doing. I'm waiting, I said. I won't drive if you start fighting. They quickly got the message. To be fair, they were very good most of the time! Probably too scared of what might happen if they weren't!

The Israelites started grumbling shortly after they set off from Mount Sinai. They grumbled about the water which tasted bitter (Ex15). Then they grumbled about the food. "In Egypt we sat around pots of meat and ate all we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve us to death!" God's response was to send an abundance of quail and manna which tasted like wafers made with honey (Ex 16:31). But it wasn't long before they began grumbling again about lack of water. At God's command Moses struck the rock and water appeared. The place was called Massah and Meribah (Testing and Quarrelling) because the people had tested God "Is the Lord among us or not?" (Ex 17:7)

The complaints continue into the Book of Numbers "We remember all the fish we ate in Egypt, also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic! But now we have lost our appetite – we never see anything but this manna!" (Numbers 11:6). God provided again and again, but still the Israelites forgot. They looked at their problems, instead of looking at God. The more they did this, the more distorted became their perception of events. They grumble about not having bread, and then moan about the taste of the food they have! They look back with longing to Egypt, but somehow forget how their baby sons were killed and how brutally they themselves were treated there!

God hadn't promised them an easy journey; but he had promised he would be with them. The Israelites had witnessed God's ability to deal with their enemies. But their grumbling showed they didn't fully trust God. They doubted that his plans for them were good; they doubted that he would provide for them; doubted that he would deliver his promises. They even turned back from the boundary of the Promised Land because they let their fears govern their destiny.

Their rebellion got so great God had to punish them. In desperation the people realise their sinfulness and God provides a way out. Notice that God didn't take away the problem! The snakes remained! Maybe to remind the Israelites not to be too casual about life. Not to take His blessing for granted. The pole with the bronze snake was a reminder to keep God in the forefront of their minds; they needed to come to Him in order to be healed. It is the same for us; we need to come to Jesus, our crucified and risen Saviour, to receive our own healing and restoration.

What lessons can we learn from these readings? I fear many of us over the last year will have resorted to grumbling at some point or another! We're on a path we didn't expect and that we definitely didn't want. We've grumbled about the situation we are in, grumbled at our loss of freedom, even though the constraints are intended to keep us safe. We've grumbled about our government, what it has done, or failed to do; grumbled about shops being shut, shops being open; grumbled about the behaviour of others, grumbled about masks...maybe grumbled about church, what has or hasn't happened here... this list could go on and on!

The danger is with all these grumbings, we can take our eyes off God! We can forget that he is in control! Are we nearly there yet? I don't know, but God does! His plans for us are good! Always good! He will give us what we need when we need it. The road ahead may not always be easy, but God has promised to be with us. He will never abandon us. Don't follow your fears! Look to Jesus and be comforted! Take hold of the new things God has for you, because yes, even in the desert, the Israelites were given new opportunities! Bring your fears to the foot of the cross and leave them there! Don't go back to pick them up! Look up instead and see Jesus' face shining down upon you and be blessed! Amen

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