

Message for March 14, 2021

Numbers 21:4-9

John 3:14-17

“The Snake Man”; this was my nickname for one of my classmates back in grade eight in public school. He really didn’t like people much but his snakes were another matter altogether. He loved them with a passion and would often bring them to school and let them slither up and down his arms and around his neck. He also loved encouraging us classmates to do the same. Like many others, and perhaps even most people, I don’t really care for snakes and so you can imagine how thrilled I was when he would start passing them around. Truthfully, I didn’t want to have anything to do with them but on the other hand no one was going to call me a chicken either! And so I handled them and let them slither around me although I must admit that I drew the line at kissing them the way he did!

It doesn’t seem to matter whether they be harmless garter snakes or dangerous threats like cobras or pythons, snakes often inspire an almost instinctive fear and revulsion in most of us. This being the case though, it is fascinating to realize that back in the days of the Old Testament it was a bronze snake of all things that was *the* symbol of God’s healing.

At the time of today’s first scripture passage the Hebrews had left Egypt and were on their way to the Promised Land. The journey though was dragging on and the people were getting sick and tired of it all. To be sure God was providing them with the manna and quails to eat but even that wasn’t good enough; eating the same thing day after day was so monotonous. They were tired too of trudging through the desert, week after week, month after month, and year after year. Perhaps it is no wonder then that the people started to complain and wondered if they should have just stayed in Egypt in the first place.

The Bible tells us that the people were plagued with poisonous snakes as a punishment for their faithlessness. These snakes were called “fiery” because of the bright red inflammation caused by their bites and those who were bitten died. The people turned to Moses for help and he in turn turned to God. God

instructed Moses to make a bronze serpent and place it on top of a pole. Then, as in the words of an old hymn:

When the Hebrew prophet raised
The brazen serpent high,
The wounded looked and straight were cured,
The people ceased to die.

For hundreds of years afterwards that bronze serpent played its own unique role in the life of God's people. If a person was sick and in need of healing, they could go to the Temple in Jerusalem and gaze upon it. Who knows they thought, perhaps they would be cured! As time went by though, the people's ideas about the serpent changed. In the beginning the bronze snake had symbolized God's healing, but then the people started thinking that it was the snake itself that was the source of their healing. Many people in fact started treating the serpent like a god until it got to the point where one of Israel's kings ordered that it be destroyed. And yet while that bronze snake was gone, the memory of it lingered on for hundreds of years. Perhaps we shouldn't be that surprised then that even Jesus himself made reference to it.

It was late at night when Jesus was visited by a man named Nicodemus. Nicodemus was wealthy, respected and a member of the Sanhedrin which was the powerful council that governed the Temple. Nicodemus was seemingly a success but he also had a problem; he knew that he was sick, not physically but spiritually. Despite all that he had and all that he had accomplished, he knew that there was something missing in his life, and so he paid Jesus a visit.

The result of this get-together was one of the greatest theological discussions of all time. In it Jesus made reference to being born again and also uttered some of the most famous verses of the entire Bible: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should 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." Jesus also spoke about how this was going to happen and when he did so he made reference to the famous, or perhaps infamous, bronze serpent of days gone by. "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."

Just as Moses lifted up the serpent for the physical healing of God's people, so too would Jesus be lifted up for their spiritual healing. This of course is what we remember on Good Friday. In the words of St. Peter, "He himself bore our sins on his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed." Christ died for our spiritual healing or more specifically, the forgiveness of sins. I sometimes wonder though if this is a healing that many people don't really think they need.

Sin is not a very popular topic nowadays. Many people for example like to think that people don't sin, rather they make mistakes, are misguided or sick. Or perhaps people lack such as a good family life, good moral examples, a good education, a good job or something else. In the eyes of many, sin does not exist and if there is no such thing as sin, then it follows that there is no need for forgiveness. And if there is no need for forgiveness then there is no need for the cross either. In short, if there is no illness then there is no need for a cure. This is what many people like to think but if we give it some thought, how can we possibly say that there is no such thing as sin after what we see on the news or read in the newspapers every day? Every time we watch the news or pick up a newspaper, we are confronted by the reality of sin.

Even on a more personal level, our very consciences tell us that there is such a thing as sin. Who has never felt troubled because of something they've either said or done? Truly St. John spoke the truth for all of us when he wrote: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." The sad tragic reality is that all of us are to some degree sick – soul sick. But the good news and promise of the gospel is that we can be healed, if we want to be. And this is the key; we want to be. We don't have to repent and be healed; the choice is ours. Consider the life of Lord Kenneth Clark.

Lord Clark has been dead for almost forty years but he was one of the foremost art historians of his day and even now his influence lives on. In his autobiography, Clark said that while visiting a beautiful church one day he had what he considered to be an overwhelming spiritual experience. "My whole being", he wrote "was irradiated by a kind of heavenly joy far more intense than anything I had known before". But this flood of grace, as he called it, posed a problem. If he allowed himself to be influenced by it then he knew that he would

have to change the way he lived his life or, to put it another way, he would have to be born again. But how could he? The changes he would have to make! As he almost sadly wrote, "I was too deeply embedded in the world to change course."

Jesus once said that the truth will set us free, but it can only do so if we are willing and able to accept the truth about ourselves and have the moral courage to accept responsibility for what we have done or not done in life's journey. Only then can we be freed from the mistakes and bad choices of the past. This perhaps is not what we really want to hear, but it is never too late to repent. To return to the life of Lord Clark, in the days shortly before his death he was, so-to-speak reborn; he turned to God, repented, confessed and so was healed of what ailed him, not physically of course but spiritually. And so it is with us. We do not have to accept the healing that God so freely offers. We can remain locked in a world of spiritual pain and heartache with no peace between us or within us, but why on earth should we?