

Lent 4B 2018

What a disobedient lot were those wandering tribes of Israel! If they were not doing the wrong thing, they were busy complaining about the right things! Poor God: damned if he did, damned if he didn't!

Having forgotten about the waters of Kadesh from the rock at Meribah, they immediately turned back to grumbling. At Kadesh, Moses' sister Miriam died, and once again, there was a lack of water. "We can't get water for ourselves, our livestock, grow grains, let alone pomegranates, vines and figs!" Having confronted both Moses and Aaron, they were very much, not happy campers!

Moses, on God's instructions, had struck a rock and brought forth water, but the place was to be known from that time on as *Meribah*, which means the place of quarrel. They were quiet, for a little while until the kingdom of Edom refused to let them pass. They were forced to find another way to get to the Promised Land.

To make matters worse, Aaron died at Mount Hor. Moses, having stripped Aaron of his priestly vestments, anointed Eleazar who became the High Priest. After a month of mourning, they set out back to the Red Sea to get around Edom. It was near the Red Sea that had a battle with the Canaanite king of Arad, and prevailed. But impatient to the end and frustrated at returning to the beginning point of the Exodus journey, the whinging started again. "No food, no water, and what we do eat is miserable." So, in went the serpents and many of the Israelites were killed.

God once again hears their cry for mercy and relents. He gives them a healing, but with a particular teaching attached. In order to survive, they must look up and remember what God has done for them. Taking a serpent made of bronze, Moses placed it on a pole. It was in the looking up that people were to remember that God is in charge, and they would live.

It would seem strange to have a symbol of death as a means of saving life...or is it that strange after all?

The rod with the serpent was not unknown in the world at the time of Moses. In the Greek mythical world, it was a common sign of healing and wholeness. In the modern medical world, the Rod of Asclepius is a common symbol

Asclepius was a Greek God of healing, and the origin was quite straight forward. At the Temple in his honour, non-venomous snakes, and parts of their bodies were used in the healing arts. In the Hippocratic Oath, Asclepius is indeed one of the deities to which the oath was sworn. The modern logo of the Epworth Hospital, a stylised letter 'e' on a pole, is actually a modern interpretation of the Rod.

So, where does this lead us? Well, all the way to Jesus!

The idea of the Rod of Asclepius was to be a symbol of medical arts that were there to help people in distress. It was carried by itinerant healers and became pretty well adopted across the world. Finding almost the identical symbol being placed in the midst of Israel is of no surprise. Of course, it would not be smooth sailing for the rod in the story of the Hebrews. The rod became known as Nehushtan and pretty soon, it became a graven image that inspired cultic practices. Once again, instead of remembering the good story of how God saved, the means of the saving had replaced God.

King Hezekiah had no other option than to destroy the rod and all temples associated with Nehushtan because it was in direct contradiction to the Commandment of God: You shall not make a graven image and worship it.

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Once again, a God-given symbol of healing had also become a symbol of death.

...and it comes around again. "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

The symbol of death, the cross, was lifted up; and by looking to the one on the pole of the Romans, all may be saved. It was a very strong parallel, and once again, a gift from God in the midst of unbelief, panic, death and suffering. And no more suffering was to occur than the suffering of God himself, incarnate, and nailed to the tree of life.

The symbolisms and metaphors are now beginning to flow thick and fast as we approach the amnesia, the remembrance of Easter.

Today, on this Refreshment Sunday, with a little light hearted-ness and taking a breather in the midst of the Lenten Fast, the readings are about death, suffering and redemption. The Psalm, even in the short extracts, tells of God's goodness. I can assure you that much of the rest of the Psalm is not so kind.

In the Psalm, as we sung today, there is the repeated refrain of *Let them give thanks to the Lord for his goodness and the wonders he does for his children*. The ones that wandered in the desert lifted up their heads towards God and were saved; those in prison, darkness and gloom called on the Lord, and his steadfast love freed them into light; some were sick because of their sinful ways, and looking to God, they found healing; deserts became rivers, stormy seas were calmed, and the diminished were raised up.

Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

In the midst of our lives, writes the Psalmist, there is but turmoil, but in the goodness of God, there is mercy.

As we look to the second part of our Lenten journey, let us not dismiss that for some, if not many, the journey of life is one of struggle. But also, let us keep in mind that beyond the turmoil, beyond the noise, beyond our own short-comings, there is hope. The symbol of death and destruction is also for us a sign of the good that is to come. It is the foolishness of wisdom for the Greeks; a folly for those looking for materialistic restoration of Israel.

We look to him who died on the cross, and knowing that he lives for ever, there too, in our steadfastness, we are invited to place our hope, our faith and our love.

May this time of refreshment also serve you well as time to re-committing to the journey into Jerusalem, and the taking of the gospel to all the world.

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