

the brazen serpent and the lifting up of Jesus

a sermon preached on the
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Numbers 21: 4-9; Psalm 107; Ephesians 2: 1-10; John 3: 14-21

Have you ever noticed in a hospital car park in the 'Doctors Only' section that their cars often display as a badge or windscreen sticker a logo of the healing profession which is a serpent twined around a bronze pole? What's behind this rather strange image?

Here in today's rather puzzling Old Testament reading we have the answer. The people of Israel are being bitten by snakes in the wilderness as they continue their Exodus journey towards the Promised Land. Things had not gone well for Moses and his exiles: sin had reared its head once again and the people had lapsed into disobedience and sin. They grumbled about the manna food mysteriously provided and so picketed Moses. God, according to the narrative, eventually lost patience with them, and sent poisonous snakes to chastise them. Many who were bitten died. In panic the survivors petitioned Moses to beg God to forgive them. God told Moses to make a bronze snake, put it on a pole, and advise those bitten to gaze at it so that the bite would not prove fatal.

This story has resonances with the myths of Ancient Greece. Asclepius was the god of healing and his symbol was two snakes entwined around a pole. Moses' antidote to the snakebites being inflicted on his people in the desert is that they should look at the serpent image that he held aloft. By doing this they would live. In Greek culture a *pharmakon* was a poisonous drug which if taken in the right dosage was a remedy. This is the derivation of our English words *pharmacy* and *pharmacist*.

Scholars disagree on the date of the Exodus (some even doubt that it ever occurred!) but most seem to have settled on 1250 BCE. So over a thousand years later in the first century of the Common Era, the new Israel, the embryonic church of Paul and the first Christians was in a similar situation to that of the wandering Jews in the desert in the times of Moses. The same problems of waywardness and disobedience were surfacing in Ephesus. St Paul has taken on an almost Mosaic role. In the Old Testament the journey was geographical (from Egypt to the Promised Land) but now the journey is what our Vicar would describe as 'cosmic', away from 'the prince of the power of the air' to Christ with whom we are to 'sit in the heavenly places' leaving behind the sins of the flesh which were so plaguing the Ephesians.

Thus we have it in today's mystical and cosmic Gospel of John: "And 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". Thus Jesus being lifted up is one of John's most important phrases: it occurs three times in this mystical cosmically-

oriented Fourth Gospel. In a bad-tempered argument with the Pharisees which ends with an attempt to stone him, Jesus speaks about who he is and why he has come into the world – ‘when you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realise that I AM’. Now *I AM* is code in John’s Gospel for the mysterious ineffable name of Israel’s God, in Hebrew *Yahweh*, who had been revealed to Moses at the burning bush in those words which mean ‘*I AM who I AM*’. And his being will be disclosed to the world when *they*, his enemies, have ‘*lifted him up*’.

We begin to glimpse what this will mean, and what it will cost: “I, when I am lifted up from the earth will draw all people to myself”. And so the Johannine vision is fleshed out leading inexorably to the crucifixion. There is a pungent ambiguity about the very phrase of being lifted up. In one sense John means it literally: Jesus will be ‘lifted up’ to die, hoisted up in crucifixion as a mark of public humiliation and disgrace. But in a deeper sense, the sense for John that really matters, the Christ will be lifted up on a throne to reign, this one whose kingdom is not of this world. And so he cries out from the cross “It is finished which in Latin is “*Consummatum est!*”

So the bronze serpent of the desert looks forward to the cross. Jesus, by speaking of being lifted up in the vision of the writer of this Gospel which carries John’s name is saying: “Look. Just look”. For us in these dark days, look at the evil which abounds in life on a vast scale internationally on the one hand: just think – holocaust, pogrom, massacre, ethnic cleansing, terrorism rape, hatred, revenge, anger. Then on the other hand, think closer to home, nationally, or locally, or in the church or in families. Look deep *within yourself* at the things of which you are most ashamed. Just look. Face up to the consequences of living the way you do. Just look. Face the truth.

Look at Jesus Crucified. The grand stone high altar reredos in St Alban’s Abbey in England has carved into the stonework these words:

I AM ON THE CROSS FOR THEE; THOU THAT SINNEST CEASE FOR ME.

In St Alban’s Abbey in Lent 1966, being troubled as pious ordinands commonly are about unworthiness, I knelt there and looked up at the image of the crucified Christ and resolved to be a better candidate for the priesthood. It’s a disclosure experience I have never forgotten.

In the famous painting on I have put show this morning the crucifixion is viewed symbolically from above as if God the Father it is who views Christ the Son’s ultimate and eternal sacrifice. We at the foot of the cross traditionally view the sacrifice of Calvary from below. We look up at Christ crucified.

Let me comment on this painting: we normally think of the paintings of Salvador Dali as surrealist. Distorted clock faces, weird fantasies. This however is one of Dali’s earliest paintings titled *Christ of St John of the Cross*, painted in 1951 and now hanging in the Glasgow Art Gallery. It was immediately controversial: the Church of Scotland objected to it and declared it heretical because the feet of Christ did not touch the ground! But it was hung and has been on view ever since. It is very famous. A copy of it has hung in my classroom at each of the six schools where I have been chaplain. I have always put it on display in Church and Chapel during Holy Week and Easter. It is a brilliant use of perspective displaying Christ above the Sea of Galilee viewed from above instead of below. Just look at it. It is an artist’s best comment I know on the

themes of today's Gospel reading. Then look within yourself, honestly and knowingly, because you alone know your secrets. Remember also that as we pray in Archbishop Thomas Cranmer's superb language in traditional Anglican liturgy at the Eucharist, from God 'no secrets are hidden'. A wise psychologist once mused: "We are best to be known by our secrets". But then God alone knows our secrets for from God as we say at each Eucharist, from God "no secrets are hidden".

Today is mid Lent, a Refreshment pause on our Lenten journey to ask for healing and continued sustenance on our pilgrimage to Easter Day. So this morning do as I did all those years ago in St Alban's Abbey: look up at the Salvador Dali painting of the Crucifixion scene, and express sorrow for your persistent and prevailing sins and ask yourself: "Of what am I most ashamed?"

Then pray as you look up and recall that reredos inscription:

I AM ON THE CROSS FOR THEE; THOU THAT SINNEST CEASE FOR ME.