

St Mark's 10th March 2024

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

Sermon

If we were expecting to hear something comforting this morning, given its Mothering Sunday, you might feel a bit short-changed by our reading. It's one of the more obscure passages in scripture, but it is one of those which come up in our three-year cycle of lectionary readings. And by now, you'll know I don't shy away from these weird passages, but treat them as something of a challenge, to wrestle with, to shake about until some truths fall from these words.

At first glance, this passage has little in common with our 21st century experiences. God appears like some cruel despot, sending Bond villain-esque punishments, raising serious safeguarding concerns. It sits uncomfortably with both our theology and scientific reasoning. It is certainly in sharp contrast with our gospel passage that tells us God didn't send Jesus to condemn us, but to save us, because we are loved beyond measure. Poisonous snakes feel a million miles from those words.

Just a side note, we should really refer to them as venomous snakes rather than poisonous. According to biologists, organisms which bite or inject toxins are venomous. A poisonous organism unloads toxins when you eat it, so Snow White's apple was poisonous rather than venomous...but perhaps I'm getting bogged down with detail here?

Snakes, or serpents, have something of a bad reputation in scripture. The first one appears in the Garden of Eden, a crafty serpent, we are told – crafty isn't a compliment, it gives us a clue to the gaslighting that's about to occur. Snakes in literature don't fare much better. You might remember Kaa, the huge hypnotic python in *The Jungle Book*, or Nagini, Voldemort's pet in *Harry Potter*. In films, we have the ophidiophobia of Indiana Jones – the technical word for his fear of snakes. A fear you might be left with if ever you watch the film, *Snakes on a Plane*.

But I wonder if any of you recognise this symbol:



It is of a snake wound round a branch, and this, or something like it, is used to represent the modern medical profession. That's because it's based upon Asclepius, the Greek god of healing, who is usually depicted with a snake wound round a staff, and who used the snake to sometimes bring people back from the dead. Hold that thought because we'll come back to that shortly...

So, as I usually do, let me try and put this passage in context, firstly by taking a wide-angled lens.

The book of Numbers is part of the Torah, the first five books of the Jewish scriptures, our Old Testament. It's the 4th in the series. Genesis comes first – a word that simply means 'beginning' – a very good place to start the story of God and God's people. Next comes Exodus about slavery and the long and winding road the freedom. A story which is repeated over and over in the rest of scripture. Leviticus is a sort of handbook, a manual to dip in and out of with over 300 rules for good living. Deuteronomy is the last, a history book written in the present tense, because history was seen as something living and breathing to make sense of today.

The book of Numbers reads more like a journal, for a group of people making a living scratching around in the desert whilst looking for a permanent home. It's a curious mixture of prayers, prophecies, rules, songs, and there are unsurprisingly plenty of numbers there too. Oh, and a talking donkey. But that's a story for another day.

This is about a nation on the move, with Moses as their leader, who are not backward at coming forwards with their complaints about the sleeping arrangements and their nostalgia for the food back in Egypt. Moses despairs, asks God what on earth he'd done to deserve such an awful, ungrateful bunch of people.

But the book of Numbers also contains arguably the world's greatest blessing, tucked away, one which we say sometimes at the end of services, and almost always at baptisms:

*The LORD bless you and keep you;
the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.*

So let's not discount this book before we've even started.

The people, lost in the wilderness, are feeling deeply insecure, and God is not always a reliable companion. They have witnessed God send those ten plagues before their liberation from slavery and might be questioning how safe and trustworthy God really is. Having spent years on the move, inevitably they are losing confidence they will ever see the Promised Land. We're told they had become impatient, which I feel is an unfair accusation. Impatience would be expecting to be in a place of luxury after a few days. Impatience would be complaining about quality of the footpath on the floor of the Red

Sea. Impatience would be telling Moses they were fed up with the same food after a week. But they'd been on this journey for years by now.

Bethesda has recently started up a new World Kitchen project, where asylum seekers in our town are able to use the kitchen facilities to cook a meal from one of their home countries for other asylum seekers. Many of them are living in a local hotel, waiting for their applications to be assessed, and whilst that sounds lovely, the hotel has no cooking facilities. Instead, three meals a day are provided, with no choice and little variety. The people I speak to are grateful for this food, I hear little complaint, except their desire to cook something that reminds them of home. Imagine, just for a moment, living in one room, a Travelodge perhaps, for months on end, and having no choice about the food you are given. I'd get fed up pretty quickly. I'd be impatient for my favourite meals.

God then sends venomous snakes we are told, which bite some of the Israelites, many of whom died. The text does not say God sent the snakes because the people were moaning – they draw that conclusion for themselves. Remember, they were in a desert place, where there would have been lots of dangerous snakes about.

It makes me wonder how much suffering we attribute to God, as if it is deliberately sent by God because we're doing something wrong. The 2004 Boxing Day tsunami in the Indian Ocean prompted all sorts of conclusions as to why God had allowed this to happen, or more specifically, why God had caused the tsunami, and some Christians became convinced it was because God was angry at gay sex.

I think in this instance of the venomous snakes, the causal link between God and the behaviour of the people is a little more clearly defined, a conclusion more easily reached. But we should strike a note of caution whenever anyone suggests God sends punishment upon us, and especially upon those we feel deserve to suffer.

The people are frightened into behaving well – never a good motivation – and they plead with Moses. Moses, as always, takes it to God, who tells him to put a snake on a pole. Going back to that word, venomous for just a moment, in Hebrew, it means fiery. You might think of the hot pain you'd feel if bitten by a snake injecting toxins into you with its sharp fangs. We're in the era of the bronze age in this story. Copper and tin, the ingredients for bronze, have fairly low melting points, but still, bronze was time-consuming to make and was therefore considered precious and had a sacred quality to it. This fiery snake was made through the smelting fire, and the words in Hebrew for snake and bronze are very similar indeed.

The people are saved by looking at this healing fiery serpent. These are very weird images. And we are left with more questions than answers, about how people were healed by a bronze stick, and why they were bitten in the first place. So even more

peculiar that the gospel writer John would choose this obscure story to squeeze into the exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus.

Jesus knew the ancient writings, as did this educated man who visits him at night. And we know the story-telling capacity of Jesus, of taking sharp imagery to help paint a picture. It's been suggested that the influence of the Greek gods was widespread in Israel at the time of Jesus; stories of that god Asclepius would have been told, especially amongst those who were educated. Early Christianity was almost certainly competing with the cult of Asclepius, a god who could supposedly heal and bring people back from the dead.

Jesus is challenging these stories by saying I don't prescribe the cures, I am the cure. I don't shed my skin to ensure new life, I will die and rise again into a transformed life. He will take those toxins, what we might refer to as sin, the structural injustices which permeate our culture, and face them head on. And he takes that story of Moses and the bronze snake and tells us he will be lifted high, but just looking at the cross is not the thing that will save and heal and redeem us. The cross is not a talisman. It's not a charm or an amulet. Instead, salvation comes to those who see the truth of what Jesus proclaims about the love of God.

There remains in this story the deeply problematic issue of the character of God. God, who is moved to regret when most of the world perishes in the flood of Noah. But here God seems more angry, petulant even, vengeful and perhaps even a bit petty. Why would the people who have suffered so much and for so long continue to trust God, who doesn't behave with steadfast love and faithfulness, but with long absences inflicting death on those who dare to criticise the divine plan. What on earth can we redeem from this text that might help us in our lives today?

As we move ever closer to Good Friday through our Lenten journey, we might consider the unpredictable nature of life. Both the snake and the cross were causes of death, but both were transformed by God, and transformed into symbols of life and not death.

We continue to face challenges with world politics dripping with venom, with the very real toxins of narcotics and alcohol. People who are not living abundant lives due to toxic relationships. And if we widen than lens, we see evidence of our rivers poisoned, our seas polluted, our atmosphere choking.

There is much which needs to be healed. Much poison in our world which needs rooting out. God, through the covenant, made promises the people failed to believe, that liberation and redemption were worth the journey. That commandments and laws were a channel for their freedom. And so God tried a new way, a new covenant, which helped us reframe our relationship with God through Jesus.

The Israelites initially claim they have no food or water, but immediately contradict themselves by admitting they do have food, just not the food they want. God continues to provide, but the greed of a minority which hoards that provision, with an insatiable appetite, risks the health and wellbeing of their neighbours. So there is something here about the demands made by those who already have sufficiency, and why we do not hear the voices of those who have nothing.

Despite these layers of meaning hidden within these texts, I remain troubled by how God's nature is portrayed in this story of Moses and the bronze snake. It reinforces that narrative of a God of wrath in the Old Testament, a narrative I frequently contest, presenting instead a God of creation and liberation – that is the God I find in these ancient stories. And so I can only conclude by reminding myself of how and why these pieces of scripture were written – by dispirited people who felt abandoned, and when things went wrong they felt punished. There is much lament in scripture, something we are deeply uncomfortable to replicate in modern worship – we don't tend to shake our fists and shout at God. And so, this image of God is only one of the human experiences we find, only one of the interactions amongst countless others with locate God right in the heart of suffering moved by compassion.

I share this with you, not to say these stories don't matter, but because they need to be confronted. I believe we should wrestle with them and not just pick the easy ones which speak clearly of love.

The truth I have found this week is the fact that death will be transformed by God. We might not know what that looks like, or how it will happen, but our journey to the cross and beyond takes us through the very worst of humanity, the most appalling pain, and out the other side into the newness of life. Into a love which is stronger than that which would do us harm. Lent invites us to reflect on our mortality, on our relationship with God and with each other, to find love and life even when all around us is pain and death. Amen