

Lessons

Numbers 21: 4 – 9

St John 3: 14 – 21

*Prayer of Illumination*

Let us pray.

Holy God, Mystery beyond mysteries, we bow before You in silence and meditation; may we be still, at one with You. Fill us with spiritual wisdom. Amen.

The Bible is rich with imaginative stories. I never fail to be inspired by stories from the Old Testament and the Gospels; stories which are carefully crafted narratives inviting our engagement. Today our Old Testament story is from the Book of Numbers. Set towards the end of the forty years of wandering in the wilderness, the people of Israel complain to God that there is no food and no water. In this ancient faith narrative we are told, 'The LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died'. In response, the people acknowledged to Moses that they had sinned. Moses prayed for them. Again, we read:

The LORD said to Moses, 'Make a poisonous serpent and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.'

Moses did as God had said. Those bitten by poisonous serpents looked to the serpent of bronze and survived; their life was restored.

It is a curious story: how could Moses have made a serpent of bronze (the melting point of bronze is 950 degrees centigrade)? This is poetic imagery; it is imaginative mythology. What are we to make of this story?

In the Jewish Talmud, scholars wrestle with the suggestion that there might be a hint of superstition in this story: they reject superstition totally. In the Talmud, we read, 'Could a snake [on a pole] cause death [by *not* looking at it] or give life [by looking at it]? A thousand years after the setting of the story of Moses and the bronze serpent, there is another story in the Second Book of Kings about the pole and the bronze serpent. In this second story, the adorned pole has accumulated mysterious sanctity in the eyes of the people and the king, Hezekiah, enacts iconoclastic reform: the pole and serpent are destroyed. The king described it as *nehushtan*: a brazen thing, a mere piece of brass. Snake cults were well-established in the Bronze Age, but what does the story of the poisonous serpents and the bronze serpent mean? What else can we say about serpents and snakes?

In the Book of Genesis, on the fifth day, the first creatures made by God are 'the great sea monsters' or serpents. Later, in the story of the Exodus, when Moses and Aaron confront Pharaoh with their demand for freedom, Aaron as a demonstration of God's power throws his staff to the ground and, when he does so, the staff becomes a serpent. Pharaoh's magicians do likewise: their staffs are thrown to the ground and transform into serpents. In that story, the serpent of Moses and Aaron devours the serpents of Pharaoh; or, more accurately, the staff of Moses and Aaron devours the staffs of Pharaoh. There is a miracle within a miracle. What are we to make of these serpentine stories?

Some scholars differentiate between serpents and snakes. Before he confronts Pharaoh, Moses asked God what he would do if Pharaoh did not believe him. God said to Moses, 'What is in your hand?' 'A staff', he replied. 'Throw it on the ground.' Moses did so and it became a snake. Moses drew back but God said, 'Reach out your hand and seize it by the tail'. Moses did so and it returned to being a staff. It was a snake which seduced Eve and, in the view of some, the story of Moses and the tail of the snake suggests that humanity's relationship with God will be restored in Moses, in *Moshe*.

In the mystical tradition of Judaism, the story of Aaron and Pharaoh, of the staff devouring the staffs, is about belief and unbelief: belief in the God who made the serpents, the sea monsters, the dome of the sky, the land and the seas; or unbelief, that is, belief in lesser gods. Does mention of the serpent bring to mind the God who creates the most powerful creatures on the Earth? Serpents symbolise power, suffering, pain and death. The poisonous serpents which attacked the people of Israel may not have been the great sea monsters of Genesis 1, but to the people of Israel they were not less potent and deadly.

In English, we read that God 'sent' the poisonous serpents; in Hebrew, it reads, 'God let loose' or 'God set free' the creatures. In other words, it was not that God sent the serpents, but that God no longer offered the people of Israel divine protection. Throughout their sojourn, the serpents had always been there; God had held them back. It is a beautiful paradox that the creature which is the symbol of power, suffering, pain and death, is the same one that Moses used to symbolise greater power, healing, and new life. In the Christian

story, we use the Cross, a symbol of death, to symbolise power, healing and new life. Our paradox is rooted in Judaism.

In all this talk of snakes and serpents and mutating staffs, it is important to understand that in gazing on the bronze serpent the people realised that the bites from poisonous serpents were not punishments sent by God, but self-inflicted wounds. It was when they had lost sight of God in their life, albeit due to suffering and hardship; nevertheless, they had lost sight of God in their life, they had lost the depth which God gives, and they became selfish, self-obsessed and their wounds were self-inflicted. The people had made the act of *yevidah*, inner descent; through gazing on the bronze serpent, the experienced *alifah*, joy, elevation and union with the Divine. The imaginative imagery of the poisonous serpents, if we read it with the eye of the heart, is about spiritual death.

In the Talmud, we read that there is no power in the bronze serpent. What matters is that, in gazing at the serpent, in looking up, the people are returning their hearts to the One who created all things, to the One who created the heavens and the earth. In looking up, the people looked to their Father in heaven, to the Mother who gave

birth to all life. I am sure that all of this imagery and meaning is intended in the Gospel of John by Jesus when He said, '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'. It should come as no surprise to us that the Fourth Gospel is referring to spiritual death and spiritual life.

The founder of the L'Arche Community, Jean Vanier, one of the spiritual giants of our time reflects on the words of Jesus, on gazing at into the Christ lifted up. Vanier writes:

As we enter into relationship with Jesus and follow him,  
we receive the life that is in him,  
which is his relationship with his Father.....  
As we grow in friendship and oneness with Jesus,  
we begin to recognise the eternal life within us and  
are less attracted by the idols of money or power.  
We begin to see people as Jesus sees them;  
we begin to love them as Jesus loves them  
and to see and love ourselves as Jesus sees and loves us.

He goes on:

To open ourselves up to this new life  
is like making a journey or going on a pilgrimage.  
We are walking towards a holy land, led by the Spirit of Jesus.  
The road can sometimes be rough and tortuous....  
Some of us can be quite closed for a variety of reasons.  
Perhaps as children or adults we had to protect ourselves  
and prove our worth,

or perhaps we felt rejected because we had a disability,  
or lost self-esteem and did not know who we were.  
Some of us had to protect ourselves from a false notion of God,  
an 'Almighty', 'all-powerful' God  
who made us feel guilty or who judged us harshly....  
We are called to gradually grow in love....  
This journey, our pilgrimage of love, begins and deepens  
as we hear God murmur within our hearts:  
'I love you just as you are.  
I so love you that I come to heal you and to give you life.  
Do not be afraid. Open your hearts....  
You do not have to be perfect or clever....  
As you become more conscious that you are loved,  
you will want to respond to that love with love,  
and grow in love.

Amen.