

Sunday 10th March 2024

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God is love, let us adore God by sharing God's love.

God is ever present, around us and within us, we worship together in God.

Readings Numbers 21:4-9
 Ephesians 2:1-10 ([NRSV](#))

Reflection

Story, myth or legend? Our reading from the book of Numbers is a strange story, it depicts an angry God, a God who punishes but also a God who heals. The story of the people of Israel's time in the wilderness is epic and encompasses many things found in other epic stories of a similar or earlier time. It is a story originally handed down orally and then written down many years later when the people were once again down on their luck. It was written to inspire, to remind people they had been there before, and within Judaism it became what many view as myth. Karen Armstrong in her wonderful book 'A short history of myth' says 'in mythology we entertain a hypothesis, bring it to life by means of ritual, contemplate its effect upon our lives, and discover that we have achieved new insight into the disturbing puzzle of our world. A myth is true because it is effective not because it gives us factual information. It works when it forces us to change our minds and hearts, gives us new hope, and compels us to live more fully.'

Usually you can discern why and how such stories come about, the circumstances for the people sound the time of writing, or the needs of the people to justify a course of action, but this story is different and yet it has found its way through later stories, most famously in John chapter 3 at the end of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus.

Sometimes it is when things go wrong that we are forced to take a step back and consider the bigger picture. We may be shocked into realising we had a hand in our own downfall just as we read the people of Israel were. However they stumbled into an area infested with poisonous snakes it caused them to make a connection with how they had been behaving and seeing their God as the way out they changed their tune, repenting of their behaviour, they turned in another direction.

The cure was quite strange, a bronze snake wrapped around a pole, and yet this has become a symbol of health care in through the years. The solution shows a vivid imagination, a creative eye and whatever its cause in the beginning it is 'legend'.

Our reading from Ephesians encourages a multilevel understanding. At first sight it is easy to read into it the idea of a counter-force that leads us astray, a force which some people personify as the devil. Perhaps the notion of the devil arises from our instinct to blame someone else. We read this first in the story of creation where Adam blames Eve and Eve blames the snake. There is often a temptation to duck out of taking responsibility but usually, if we are honest, we have got ourselves into the mess or we are the victim of pure accident. Paul reminds Ephesians that their own actions, the choice to follow their desires, has led to where they are and they need healing.

Paul talks about his belief in God's merciful love, the gift of forgiveness, a gift which we do not have to earn. This forgiveness is about restoration, we are given the opportunity to start again, to re-turn to the path we were set on as children of God. This is the message of

Jesus, nothing can separate us from God's love, God's mercy or our intended path. No matter what choices we have made in life we can always start again knowing we are right with God.

This is not simply a lovely feeling, this gift comes with responsibilities for we are to look at others differently. We are, as Jesus said, to love them as part of ourselves for we are all one in God. We are to want the best for everyone no matter what choices they may have made, for we are to reflect the mercy we have received. Beneath the choices, some of which may appal us, there is a person, a child of God just like ourselves. There but for fortune go you or I.

In John's gospel we are invited to compare the snake on the stick and Jesus on the cross. We might view it as a crude and uncomfortable analogy but it is also a reminder of Jesus' message that God's healing power is always with us. It is not the simplistic healing of story and legend, it is not the cure of plague and pestilence, it is a deep healing from the choices we have made. It is the encouragement to see beyond circumstance, to see the bigger picture, and to recognise the part our choices have played, resolving to change the things we can and recognising the things over which we have no control and accepting them. By doing this we rob them of their power to distort our outlook and that is healing.

This Sunday is Mothering Sunday. Its origins are in the early church when during lent people were given a free Sunday to return to their mother church, the church in which they were baptised. It may have been the only day in the year when they had the opportunity to return to the family base to catch up and share love. The day would also have had significance for those preparing for baptism at Easter as all those baptised gathered around them.

For many this is Mother's Day, a celebration of parenthood which has nothing to do with the church. However, it is a recognition of a love that is closest to that unconditional love of God of which Jesus spoke. As parents and carers we often angst over the choices of those we care for but choice is a part of growing up and a part of life. We can encourage awareness and wisdom but we cannot control, we can however choose how we pick up the pieces. That is love.

Such love is not restricted to parents it is the love we are all called to demonstrate in our daily lives so even today's Mother's Day is a reminder of our faith roots and the journey we travel in God. Every day we live a story which twists and turns in the same way as the stories we read of those early pilgrims, stories from which we learn, the myths and legends of faith. We are the myth makers and legend builders for generations to come, our choices have the power to inspire future choices. We are part of creation, and creation is love, and we are called to be love, to share love and reflect God's love into the world and we will do it through story, through words and actions that become a part of the very essence of life.

Psalm 107 (Psalms for a quantum World)

Eternal God, we praise you with thanksgiving;
your presence is with us always
and your love, which is beyond our imagination,
surrounds and holds us.

When our choices take us down hurtful paths,

your love draws us back, always guiding us when we listen.
There are so many ways that we make mistakes,
so many times we choose to ignore your call
but in all the desperate places of life you are with us,
loving and encouraging us and leading us back to oneness.

Your presence is the light in our darkness,
an invitation to be answered.

There is nothing which can separate us from your presence,
no choice, no situation, no circumstances,
your love heals and holds,
when we recognise this then we know the way.

The signs of your love surround us,
in creation and in the actions of others,
when we open our eyes
we are constantly reminded of your healing care for the world and all life.
When we act in oneness
peace and fruitfulness is restored and life is transformed.

Eternal God, we praise you with thanksgiving;
your presence is with us always
and your love, which is beyond our imagination,
surrounds and holds us.

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