

SERMON: 2018/03/11 (4th Sunday in Lent, Year B) - Numbers 21:4-9; Ephesians 2:1-10 & John 3:14-21\_BTR

[Invite the children to sit at the front.]

On Tuesday night I was at a rugby game with Campbell, Ellie and Elizabeth's dad, Mr Sutton; and a boy got hurt.

He felt so unwell that some EMTs came from the hospital to help him.

And I took a photo on my cell-phone.

Do you want to see?

Here it is. [Show image from iPhone.]

But look what I noticed on the side of the ambulance:

a strange (fuzzy) symbol - this is called the "star of life."

And within the "star" there was a white drawing.

Can you tell what it is?

*A snake!*

There was a snake spiralling its way up a long stick.

It looked like this: [Show enlarged hardcopy.]

This is called "a caduceus," and you will see it on signage all around hospitals and on doctors and nurses.

And it has its origin in The Bible:

The Old Testament People of God - the "Israelites" - had escaped from Egypt thanks to a series of astonishing, un-natural occurrences that God had performed for them: giant hailstones, a rain of frogs, parting the sea...

*Then*, on Mount Horeb, Moses received ten "commandments" - rules - for the people to obey.

Do you remember?

We sang about them last week.

They said things like: "Don't steal; don't lie; sex is only for marriage; and so on."

But, in the desert - on the way to "the Promised Land," Canaan - the people began to challenge God and speak against Him.

Have you ever done that?

Maybe you speak back to your mums and dads sometimes, and question their authority?

Well, one day as the people were camping in the desert, lots of poisonous snakes suddenly appeared! [Pull rubbery toy-snake from hiding place in sleeve.]

They slithered into people's tents.

They got into their beds and their shoes.

They were *everywhere!*

And they started to bite them.

On their toes and on their ankles.

On their hands too and perhaps even their faces!

It was really bad, and those who were bitten by the snakes *died*, which was very sad.

So, the Israelites came rushing to (their leader) Moses, and said: "Moses, Moses: save us. Please pray to God that He would protect us from these *horrible* snakes."

And that's what he did.

Moses prayed and God listened; and He told him, grab one of those snakes, wrap it on a pole, and stab it in the ground. And, whenever someone is hurt, tell them to look at this to be healed - *miraculously* - 'and live'.

*Isn't God good?!*

Let's pray: Father God, we thank you that your love for us is *real*, and expressed through (tangible) gifts of healing and wholeness. Help us, we pray, to trust you enough to ask for these things when we are hurt and in pain. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

[Ask children to leave.]

What a great story, right?

(*Numbers.*)

Just picture the mayhem that there must have been!

- the Israelites running around in "circles" in a panic, "scooping" up babies and small children from the ground; beating, frantically, at the hot earth with sticks and staves; women, hitching up their skirts with squeals. Men clambering up trees or on top of tall rocks to get away.

None of these things, of course, are *actually* described *explicitly* in our text, but if they are passed over by the author that's because he was in a hurry to get to the *best* bit - the climax: the factual, physical, *visible* evidence of the Creator's concern for His people, which was that *caduceus* he had them build - a tool - a "*mechanism*" - a "*technology*" - by which they might be *saved* from dying (by the poisonous bites of those sneaky snakes).

Great, yes?

"But hang on a minute!", says the - *observant* - sceptic.

(And there's always one, isn't there?

A "hole-picker."

You know the type:

The one who sees a loose thread on a favourite sweater and just can't resist from

giving it a sharp *tug*.)

"I know that it *seems* like God was - unqualifiedly - the hero here, leaping in at the "eleventh-hour" with a miracle-working healing-pole/totem-thing, but wasn't He also *responsible* for sending those venomous vermin in the first place?"

And that is what we were told.

I quote (from verse six): 'The people spoke against God...[blah, blah, blah, and so] the Lord sent poisonous serpents among [them]', [Num. 21:6].

So - and I'm playing Devil's Advocate here, as wonderful as you might say God is for intervening the way He did, the fact that He created the conditions requiring His loving action does rather - maybe! - complicate His good character (in the eyes of some folks), no?

What do *you* think?

It's a trope from romantic comedies:

the bashful, nerdy guy wants to ask the popular, pretty girl out on a date, and to get her attention stages, with the help of some trusted allies, a *mock* purse-snatching from which he [finger-quotes] "rescues" her.

She's impressed with this display of unexpected manliness and falls for him.

But then finds out it was all a deception - a ruse - and there's a big "blow-out" and so ends the relationship.

And aren't we, *potentially*, being presented with something like that here?

Is God so great if He's the one who's behind the reptiles' attack in the first place?

Is God so great if He *orchestrated* the scenario?

*This* is an important question.

Because it pertains not just to this isolated incident here, but to Jesus' death on Calvary - the most significant of all events - to which today's gospel reading alludes.

And what does it say about Christ's sacrifice?

That it was *necessary* for saving Christians from 'perish[ing]' along with a world 'condemned *already*', [Jn. 3:18].

But why so?

We "heap" praises onto God for coming into our lives in the person of that young rabbi from Nazareth, and taking our iniquity upon Himself, for being 'wounded for our transgressions' so that we may be 'made...whole'.

Those words are all straight from the Bible. [See: Is. 53:3]

And it tells us that this had to happen to 'confirm [Heavenly] justice', [Rom. 3:4-6].

But what does that mean?

What are we *really* saying?

For Saint Paul, "confirming" or, if your prefer, "satisfying," the justice of God is explanation enough: for '[t]here is no one who is righteous, not even one', [Rom. 3:10].

And that's it.

End of argument.

And yet there are those, particularly in our own era, for whom this answer will not do.

"Why doesn't God just change the rules?"

"Why doesn't He *lower* His (holy) standard?"

"If He didn't set the bar so high, then I wouldn't need Jesus to die in my place."

And you know what?

I've said these very things.

In my adolescence.

And, being a reader, I found others making the same complaint in books.

Here, listen to this:

'In the classical doctrine of the atonement [- that's the traditional view] God seems to be his [sic.] own prisoner. ... It is [His] justice which calls for justice to be done... [but i]s God really in such a strait-jacket? ...[this is a] disturbing thought...' [n.1] [Pause.]

With words like these "ringing" in my ears, I turned away from the Church - *for many years*.

However, those who imagine that they've uncovered a conundrum in the Scriptures aren't as clever as they think.

I discovered that for myself at university when I took classes in philosophy, which helped me to see more clearly what should have always been obvious: that "the good" and "the bad" are fixed poles, and the distance between them cannot be reduced; cannot be collapsed or they would cease to be the very things that they were. And *if*, contrary to this truth, we were to *pretend* that morality was, in fact, changeable - that is to say, *fickle*, or "subjective" - it would, to borrow the words of the recently deceased Billy Graham, 'make a *preposterous* world. It would be chaotic, irresponsible, self-destroying. It would be impossible to live with certainty in that kind of world. To have meaning, life must be based upon [an immutable] law and a lawgiver.' [n.2]

God, then - *because* '[He] is love' [1 Jn. 4:8b] - did not (in the desert) - and will not today - look the other way: [n.3]

'As the [loving] moral Governor of the universe God must see to it that justice is administered. Sin *ought* to be punished' (or it is no such thing). [n.4]

And if we find ourselves *straining* against this clear, solid logic, this resistance, says Saint John (in our reading), is a consequence of our (general) preference for 'darkness rather than light', [Jn. 3:19].

In other words, you might say that many of us are like the creature "Gollum" in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy.

(Are you familiar with those stories?)

A man-like creature known as a "halfling," 'plump [and] cheerful' [n.5], he is driven by his appetites - 'the desires of flesh and senses'[Eph. 2:3] - to commit acts that fill him with shame and then, full of regret and embarrassment, he attempts to hide from those confusing feelings rather than confront them, choosing an amphibious, solitary existence beneath the ground.[n.6]

And this *metaphor* should *deeply* resonate with you:

Particularly, I believe, for any who've ever struggled, like me, with pornography, for example.

Or similar sins.

We too may find ourselves hiding from our own consciences - from reality - from *candid* self-assessment.

And, collectively, this is the tragedy, which is *warping* our societies by a 'spiritual anarchy':[n.7]

*Whatever* side of the "aisle" you "sit on," we seem inclined, right now - *hungry* - to believe *flimsy* narratives, built on "fake news" and "alternative facts." [n.8]

We fear sober, nuanced, *critical* judgment - especially about ourselves.

When, *with God's help*, we begin to put aside our excuses though, our knee-jerk defensiveness, our *inflated* sense of self-worth, we can see differently; then we climb down from our pedestals - our "high-horses" - and find instead that we're on our knees.

And this is the challenge of Lent.

And the proper vantage in which we see the Cross in its most magnificent perspective.

Let's reflect.

Footnotes:

1. den Heyer, Cees J. (1998), *Jesus and the Doctrine of the Atonement*, translated by John Bowden, Harrisburg, P. A.: Trinity Press International, 132-133.
2. available at <https://billygraham.org/decision-magazine/april-2010/the-justice->

of-god/ (accessed March 8, 2018).

3. For a very helpful, persuasive, *extended* examination of this idea I recommend: Wolterstorff, Nicholas (2015), *Justice in Love*, Grand Rapids, M. I., Cambridge, U. K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
4. Pink, Arthur W. (2001), *Studies in the Scriptures, 1922-23: Volume 1 of 17*, Lafayette, I. N.: Sovereign Grace Publishers, Inc., 66.
5. Morrow, Jeffrey L. (2017), *Seeking the Lord of Middle Earth: Theological Essays on J. R. R. Tolkien*, Eugene, O. R.: Cascade Books, 51.
6. Tolkien. J. R. R. (2004), *The Lord of the Rings: 50th Anniversary One-Volume Edition*, London: HarperCollinsPublishers/New York, N. Y.: Houghton Mifflin Co., 52-54.
7. Pink (2001), 66.
8. See: Various (24th of January, 2006), 'Democrats and Republicans Both Adept at Ignoring Facts, Study Finds', *LiveScience*, available at <https://www.livescience.com/576-democrats-republicans-adept-ignoring-facts-study-finds.html> (accessed March 10, 2018).