



Second Sunday of Lent

Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright



Sunday 5 March 2023

READINGS

Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5,13-17; John 3:1-17

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What is the most quoted verse in the Bible? You can Google it. It is perhaps disputed, and maybe there is no way of saying conclusively which is the most quoted verse. But I would say that, within Evangelical circles, John 3:16 is right up there among the most quoted verses. And why is this so? Perhaps one could argue that it summarises very succinctly, the message of the Gospel. Again, perhaps Evangelicals would say, and obviously for Evangelicals, communicating or conveying the Gospel is an important aspect of their ecclesiology, that the Gospel message is encapsulated in that verse.

Now this is a question I often like to ask: what if not John 3:16, but instead John 3:14-15, the two verses immediately preceding John 3:16 were the most quoted verses of the bible? If that were the case, I think we might end up with a lot of confused people. Because John 3:14-15, I think for many people, is quite confusing: "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so too must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that whoever believes in him will have eternal life." Let us not spend much time on what John is saying at a literal level, because the import of what John is saying does not lie at a literal level. We do briefly though need to understand what John is saying at a literal level.

The incident he is referring to is in Numbers 21 where the Israelites have been trekking through the desert for a while and, as they are prone to do, they start complaining. God gets angry with them and sends down fiery serpents which are poisonous. Many of the Israelites get bitten by these snakes and die. So the people plead with Moses to intercede on their behalf and ask God for some form of respite. Moses does this and God basically says "OK fine, this is what you have to do. Fashion a giant serpent out of bronze and stick it on a pole in the middle of the community. Then, tell the people, that if they get bitten by the poisonous snakes, they should look at the bronze serpent and they will be healed." (Paraphrased)

If we go back to John 3:14-5 we then need to understand what "lifting up means for John". "Lifting up" for John means the crucifixion. John equates or sees in the action of the crucifixion, being raised from the earth, at the same time, Jesus' ascension. So what he is doing in John 3:14-15 is he is drawing a comparison or likeness between the action of Moses erecting the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness and Jesus being raised up on the cross. Let's just be clear that we can't say necessarily that John is making a direct comparison or drawing a direct likeness between the bronze serpent and Jesus, but one between the action of the bronze serpent being lifted up and Jesus being lifted up, as well as the net result of both of these to actions.

Now if you thought that all of this was confusing, it gets worse, because the Hebrew word for snake, seraph and seraphim (pl.), can mean snake or angel, depending on the context. Now we really start to go down the rabbit hole, because harking back to the dawn of creation, Genesis 2 and 3 and story of the Fall. Satan, according to tradition was a fallen angel, and what form supposedly does he take in the Fall narrative, in fact not just in the Fall narrative, in the book of revelation, he is referred to as a serpent, the ancient serpent, it says.

So that's some of the literal meaning of John 3:14-15, but what does it mean ultimately for us? The difficulty with John 3:16, to my mind, and the way it has been used (some might say overused) and the way it has been interpreted, is that it kind of sets us off on the wrong footing, or it leaves us with the wrong orientation. Our understanding of John 3:16 leaves us believing that heaven is the end, is the goal, is the be all and end all, and our lives on earth are merely stepping stones. Heaven is the end, and our earthly lives are simply a means to that end. And so our earthly lives become the condition, become the T&Cs, and so long as we follow and agree to all the T&Cs we will get to heaven.

Instead, it should be the other way around, eternal life, or the fullness of life of which Jesus speaks, or entering our second lives, should begin now on earth, and whatever else comes after that, whether we want to refer to this as heaven, as the after life, as eternal life, must be a bi-product and outgrowth of this new state of life and being that we have entered into while on earth. This is why people like Richard Rohr say that we have to die before we die.

And I think it's this second reality, or second way of approaching things, that John 3:14-15 is speaking to. Because what it is speaking to is the process or event of reconciliation, where we experience reconciliation within ourselves, reconciliation between the good parts and bad parts, between the parts we are proud to flaunt on social media and the parts of which we are ashamed, it speaks to the process of becoming a whole and integrated human being.

The snake, like the well, is an archetypal symbol, meaning that it has an almost universal and enduring meaning across space and time. It represents evil in most contexts, but it also represents the need to confront our fears, and I think it also ultimately represents healing. Before you can be healed from the snake bite, what must you take? A small amount of the venom itself. Ingesting or taking into your body a small amount of the venom will protect you from the venom, whereas if you have never been exposed to the venom, the venom will be lethal for you. The same principle applies with viruses and vaccines.

This Lent then, instead of trying to repent and abstain from petty sins (meeting the T&Cs for getting into heaven) let us work on the process of reconciliation and integration within ourselves, that we may realise who we are truly in God.

Amen