



Fourth Sunday in Lent

Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright



Sunday 10 March 2024

READINGS

Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107:1-3,17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

“For God so loved the world”

Greetings Friends. This Sunday’s Gospel reading, John 3:14-21, contains some of my favourite verses. And this is not “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life,” lovely and comforting as this verse may be. Instead, it is the two verses immediately preceding this verse – “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.” (John 3:14-15)

You might think this is a strange verse to hold in such high esteem, but it speaks to one of the central mysteries or paradoxes of the Christian faith. The verses of course invoke the well-known episode in Numbers 21, which is the placing of the Nehushtan on a pole, the giant bronze serpent, around which there was a cult in nascent Hebrew culture. Whether this episode, as it is recounted in Numbers, is condoning or condemning the cult of Nehushtan is less clear, but what the story points to is a reality that is both a biological principle and one which applies to the spiritual or interior life.

This reality is that dualisms or binaries can only take us so far. We cannot ultimately reach full maturity, or indeed, full healing, while subscribing to dualisms, binaries or absolutes. It is true that some absolutes are necessary. When you are a child, the binary of hot and cold is necessary to avoid burning your hand on a stove. But as we get older, and especially with regard to the spiritual life, absolute binaries become less and less helpful.

In his crucified form, Jesus represents everything we typically try to avoid – failure, defeat, shame, humiliation, poverty – just as for many people and many cultures the snake or serpent represents everything they are fearful of. In conjunction, both passages, that of Numbers 21 and John 3:14-15, are saying that our paths inevitably will encounter the very things we have spent our lives trying to avoid – indeed, we must encounter this if we hope to have eternal life. When I say “eternal life” I’m not meaning “going to heaven” or being “saved,” which is a very narrow, binary way of understanding salvation. Eternal life is the seed falling to the ground to die which brings forth new life. It is the spring of water welling up to eternal life. It is the kingdom of God, “in the midst of you.”

One cannot really talk about these things so much as experience them, and unless and until we have experienced them, talking of them makes little sense. There is a good reason why there is always a fire-breathing dragon at the end of every fairytale. The dragon is the serpent, into whose eyes the warrior

must stare in order to realise his destiny and discover his true identity. The mistake conventional culture made was to slay the dragon, to demonise the dragon, which in some sense was inevitable. In the end, however, the dragon becomes the greatest teacher.

I feel like this motif, this parable if you like, is particularly pertinent for the community of St Michael's, Bryanston, given that the church's nomenclature derives from the archangel Michael, who famously slays the dragon in the book of Revelation. There is a stained-glass window in the east transept of the church depicting this battle. Today happens to be the parish's annual vestry meeting at which some of the most important issues pertaining to the life of the parish are discussed, and at which new wardens and portfolio holders are elected. And so as we look toward yet another year of fruitful ministry, may we learn everything necessary for our mutual upbuilding and edification. Amen