

SNAKE

Snakes have a bad press – and not surprisingly, as about a million people are bitten by snakes every year, and some 30-40,000 die from snakebite. Their silence, or near silence seems to add to menace, and comparatively few people would say they really like them. I can still vividly remember the tea-party I attended as a teenager with the TV animal presenter of those days – George Cansdale. I was enchanted when he produced a bush baby, but less than enchanted when he threw a sleepy python onto my lap.

They also have a bad press in the Bible – although there were several species of snake in the ancient Near East, most of them harmless, it is seemingly only the venomous ones which get to be part of the Biblical narrative. The first appearance of course is the snake in the Garden of Eden tempting Eve. The great Leviathan – the sea serpent of later Biblical references - is part of that picture of chaos represented also by the unruly sea, which needs to be conquered by the power of God.

But the relevance of snakes for Good Friday comes from the passage we heard from St John's Gospel, where Jesus takes Nicodemus back to the story of the snakes in the wilderness which we read about in Numbers 21. The people of Israel have been grumbling to Moses about life in the desert. They would have been better off back in Egypt. The story continues that God punishes their faithlessness by sending fiery serpents, which bite them and many die. They realise this is a divine plague, and hastily reconsider their attitudes. They ask Moses to intercede for them, and God tells Moses to make a bronze serpent and put it on a pole. If they are bitten, and then go and look at the bronze serpent, they will be healed.

We are again into some pretty primitive ideas here. There were many people in the ancient world who believed in various kinds of sympathetic magic – there is a record for example of the Philistines being overrun with mice, and making a statue of a mouse which frees them from the plague. That sort of superstition is not far from this story. But Moses is not into magic, any more than God is. It isn't a question of just making the bronze serpent – they have to have faith in God's promise and go and look at it. We gather that the bronze serpent was kept and treasured for five centuries after that incident – it was kept in the Temple, until the time of the reforms of Hezekiah, when it was destroyed because it had become an object of superstitious worship itself, possibly because a serpent was also the symbol of the goddess Astarte, the consort of the god Baal. But it was not forgotten completely. In the book Wisdom, written in the days between the Old and New testaments, it is referred to as a 'symbol of salvation'.

It is with this background that Jesus says to Nicodemus that he will be lifted up like the bronze serpent had been in the desert. He is to be the means and the symbol of salvation for those who look at him. Salvation has become a very technical and theological word. We need to remember its essential meaning is healing or wholeness. Salvation means things being as they should be, complete, and undamaged. The Cross restores wholeness to the relationship between us and God. Jesus' death on the cross is a symbol of that love which puts things right spiritually, just as the snake on the pole was a symbol of God's love putting things right physically for the Israelites in the desert.

There are two words which are shared by those two stories, as well as the imagery. The first is the word 'sent'. Numbers tells us that God 'sent' the plague of poisonous snakes. And John tells us 'God *sent* not his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be healed through him'. The notion of God sending poisonous snakes to punish people is not a perception of God that we would want to propagate. Sadly there have been Christians through the ages who have clung onto that outmoded image of God in ways that have sometimes been very damaging to the Christian mission. We hear it at a personal level when people say things like 'I don't know what I've done to deserve this.' We hear it at a communal level with people saying that HIV/AIDS or global warming is God's judgement on the world. It is terrible theology to think that God zaps you when you have a moan at him. It is terrible theology because it simply isn't true. If it were, there would be an awful lot of people who got zapped! But when Numbers was written down, that was the image of God they had, and it is preserved for us. But that same word 'sent' applied to Jesus is used in precisely the opposite way. In Jesus God sends good news, and life, not bad news and death. Jesus is God in action, God who wants wholeness and healing and restoration. He didn't come by accident, but by to fulfil God's purpose. He didn't just arrive, he was sent.

The second word which the two stories share is 'lifted up' – I know it is two words in English, but it is only one in Greek! Its literal meaning is clear enough. The bronze serpent was lifted up on a pole so everyone who wanted healing could easily see it. Jesus also was lifted up – essentially on a pole again, but with a cross-piece as well. And it took place where everyone could see, because the Romans used crucifixion as the usual way of executing people, the very public humiliation and suffering being to warn others off doing anything which might put them in the same place.

But there is also a symbolic meaning of that same word – 'lifted up' in the sense of 'exalted'. Jesus refers twice more in John's Gospel to being 'lifted up' – and in the second one it is very ambiguous, because it could just as well refer to his Ascension as to the cross. And in the Acts of the Apostles, and in Paul's writings, it is used very definitely to refer to the Ascension. It is one of the things we need to hold in mind today – as someone wrote, 'where there is no cross, there is no crown'. We have to hold in tension the sadness of the cross and the glory of the cross, the apparent defeat and the actual victory. And the hymn writer applied that principle to all of us 'For only he who bears the cross can hope to wear the glorious crown'.