

Sermon preached at the Friary March 15 2015

Numbers 21, 4 - 9

John 3, 14 - 21

The Old testament contains some weird and wonderful stories, and today from the book of Numbers we certainly have one of them.

The story is about a plague of serpents. People are rightly nervous of snakes but here we have snakes breathing fire, sent by God to bite the people because they complain about God and the wilderness and the worthless food! Well we could think a lot about what all this symbolises. Anyway the people come to Moses and he prays. God says put a fiery serpent on a pole, and any who are bitten must come and *gaze upon* the image of the snake and they will be healed. *Look* at what you find most difficult, look at what most repels you. Look at what frightens you ... and you will be healed.

You might have thought that the story would have sunk without trace. But the author of the fourth gospel clearly thought it important, for suddenly early in his Gospel, it pops up in the third chapter, verse 14 where John writes: 'As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.'

But he has softened it. Notice a crucial change? Instead of the word to look or gaze, we have 'believe'. This reminds us that in the mind of John, to believe and to see are virtually synonymous. 'Come *and see*' is the repeated invitation in the very first chapter,. And then half way through the first half of his gospel (sometimes called 'the book of signs') we have the story of the man born blind whose retort to the probing sceptical Pharisees who say that Jesus is a sinner is: "I don't know whether or not this man is a sinner, all I can tell you is *once I was blind now I can see.*"

so John is saying: 'whoever looks, whoever *gazes upon* the son of Man will live ...'

How are we to make sense of this ...?

It was in this very chapel something like 42 years ago when I first came here, that I first encountered this tradition of gazing upon the crucified. I don't know whether this is still done in the Society, but I recall as a young curate being very moved when, in the middle of the liturgy, suddenly all the brothers knelt facing the cross, and stretched their hands out wide on either side of their bodies; and with all the brothers kneeling in this position gazing in adoration upon this crucified figure the whole chapel for many minutes was utterly silent.

All religions have signs and symbols that the faithful are encouraged to gaze upon, and how different religions depict their most significant figures says much about the message of those religions.

In Hinduism one of the most significant images is of the Lord Shiva as the Dancing God. Shiva Nataraj it is called. I am sure you will have seen it. Shiva, one of the most important gods in Hinduism, is depicted as dancing with his four arms gracefully waving, within a circle of flames. The flames of the circle represent the cosmos and he is the Lord of the Cosmos who dances on the dwarf of ignorance. It is an image which expresses the vitality and energy of the Divine life creating and sustaining all life.

In Buddhism, the Lord Buddha is usually pictured seated cross-legged in the lotus posture in serene and wordless contemplation ... an image perfectly poised and balanced expressing that this enlightened one, has gone beyond words into bliss.

In Christian faith, we have, many different images to gaze upon. Christ in majesty, seated as ruler of all, a great Byzantine image.

Or the image of Christ in infancy – God enfleshed as a child.

Or Christ transfigured on the mount of transfiguration his body suffused with light.

But the overriding image of Christianity is and always will be Christ crucified – stripped, nailed, bleeding, and wounded ... a figure revealing not strength and vitality as in the dance of Shiva, nor poise and beauty as in the silence of the Buddha, but weakness – revealing **wounds**, but wounds which are somehow saving. This is what we have to grapple with. Christian theology tells us that it is his wounds which save us.

The outside observer of religion might well say, I can appreciate the image of Shiva triumphant in the circle of flames. I can understand the image of the Buddha, indeed I am deeply drawn to it ... but this terrible sight ... what sense am I to make of it – what attraction is there in it? As an image of the divine life it seems grotesque. How can such a negative image be the very means of **life**?

Well there is no merely rational answer. And it seems to me whole theologies have gone profoundly wrong when they have tried to find easy 'rational' answers. If there is an 'answer' to this paradox of the cross, it is beyond mere rationality, and yet, if it is indeed the way to life, we must try to make sense of it.

I think it has something to do with the process of **identification** ... with what actually happens in the process and practice of adoration as we learn, encouraged by a long line of mystics in the church, simply to **gaze**. That word is important. 'I would gaze upon you in your holy place' says the psalmist. An early church theologian called Macarius says; '*the soul that seeks God becomes no longer anything but gazing.*' It is a quality of looking such that we begin not to be separate from, but become one with the object of our gazing as the gap between subject and object is transcended in a profound union.

For as we learn to gaze upon this wounded flesh, this bleeding form ...what we see is ourselves. We see who we, to a greater or lesser extent, truly are, and from whom, as we gaze, we cannot run.

As we see God's wounds what is revealed is that we are wounded too. I am enabled to recognise that I am a wounded person. I am able to accept myself as a wounded person. Of course we are all wounded people. You are a wounded person. I am a wounded person. And sometimes whole nations are profoundly wounded peoples. And God knows our wounds. In this figure he bears them.

This is why the cross is healing – for if we will face it – this figure who is lifted up before our eyes and on whom we must gaze ... we see who we are; beautiful but hurt people, who in our own lives to a lesser or greater degree have sustained wounds, which as we see them in him can be acknowledged and accepted, and so begin to be healed.

An awful lot of what the bible calls 'sin' has its roots in people avoiding their woundedness, whatever that woundedness may be ... perhaps a profound sense of low self-esteem, or painful experiences of early humiliation, or of having been treated with contempt – so that they carry round within them a barely disguised self-contempt. Whatever it is, many of us can carry around within us this kind of woundedness all our lives, either not recognising it, or not knowing about it, or simply pretending it is not there ... or ... and this is worse ... unconsciously seeking to compensate for it in patterns of behaviour that are destructive or violent.

This can be true not just for individuals but for whole nations. The German people at the end of the first world war experienced in the treaty of Versailles a profound humiliation as the allied powers sought in a range of ways to punish them. Arguably their national humiliation, exacerbated by the great depression of the late 20's gave Adolph Hitler, himself a deeply humiliated person, the opportunity to rise to power with all its appalling consequences.

Christianity says you do not need to hide from your wounds. The Body of God enables you to acknowledge and even embrace them – and so, strangely, find yourself healed. That is why it is such a profoundly healing religion.

What did the Risen One first show his bewildered disciples in the upper room?

He showed them his wounds.

Patrick Woodhouse.
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