

“God’s Great Gift”

A sermon by the Rev. Frances Savill

Sunday March 14, 2021

John 3:14-21

Jesus said; “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

This seems like an odd metaphor for Jesus’ life and death.

Jesus is referring to a passage from Numbers.

The people of God, the people God had set free from Egypt, the people on their way to the promised land, grumbled against God.

I know none of you grumble against God about your work, or your friends, or your church, or your family, or your situation, or your health, or the weather, or your neighbours, but God’s people sometimes grumble.

And it seems that God doesn’t always take kindly to grumbling, and a kind of metaphor happens in their midst.

Poisonous snakes appear and start biting people.

There is a certain poetry in that because grumbling is a kind of poison to the community.

Thankfully, it isn’t long before God’s people are turning back to God, crying out to be healed and saved.

Now if I had been one of the Israelites, and there were poisonous snakes around, my prayer would have been; Lord, get rid of the snakes.

But God’s answer is different – God’s answer is; look to me and you will be healed.

God instructed Moses to put a bronze serpent on a pole – and if the people were bitten they could look to God, by looking at the bronze serpent, and be healed.

But looking to God does more than just cure them from the snake bites, it heals them of grumbling against God, and poisoning their relationship with God and their community.

Jesus says that he is like the bronze serpent Moses lifted up, people look to him to be healed and saved.

I was reflecting on that – there are many days when I wish that God would wipe out sin.

But to say that is to misunderstand what sin is really about.

When sin entered the garden of Eden at the beginning we see the man and woman suddenly hiding from God, and they are ashamed before each other.

Sin, destroys our relationship with God, and with one another.

Looking to Jesus lifted up on the cross, and then when he is lifted up to the right hand of the Father when he was raised from death, provides the healing that we need.

Jesus, said, “when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.” (John 12:32)

There is something compelling about the cross – or at least there is something compelling for us who are being saved.

The cross is like a magnet, it draws some in, or for others it repels and pushes them away.

I’m reminded of a story that Anglican preacher Flemming Rutledge tells. A middle-aged Anglican woman was asking for a recommendation for a good parish to attend in their city.

Flemming suggested St. such and such congregation.

The woman explained, oh I could never go there, they have a crucifix hanging on the wall at the front of the sanctuary, and I could never stand staring up at the cross with Jesus hanging on it.

Theologian Richard John Neuhaus had a very different perspective. He wrote:

“Every human life, conceived from eternity and destined to eternity, here (at the cross) finds its story truly told.

In this killing (of Jesus), that some call senseless, we are brought to our senses. Here we find out who we most truly are, because here is the One who is what we are called to be. (Jesus) cries, “Come, follow me,” Follow Him there? We recoil. We close our ears. We hurry on to Easter. But we will not know what to do with Easter’s light if we shun the friendship of the darkness that is wisdom’s way to light.”

The cross is at the centre of our faith, the centre of our lives, and I believe Neuhaus is right, here we find our story truly told.

But it isn’t an easy story.

It is a story we often avoid, we keep ourselves busy, we love our distractions – we even have our busy church work to keep us from thinking deeply about our lives.

But sometimes we come to an end of ourselves... we hit the bottom, or we find our own sinful ways just aren’t working for us, we want life, we want another way, and the cross calls to us, compels, and invites us.

Coming to the end of ourselves is a threatening feeling.

We fear coming into the light, in being exposed for who and what we are.

But Jesus doesn’t stand over us, with pointing finger, or a guilty stare. At the cross, we see how he has completely taken on our sin.

What sin of ours could shock him, after he has endured the cross?

And his words were, “Father, forgive them.”

How could we doubt his love for us?

He spent his life with outcasts and sinners, he died between two criminals, he bore the utter shame of the cross, he suffered the most painful death imaginable, so that we would know that he understands us and loves us.

He knows our pain, he knows our shame, he has already shouldered the sin of the world.

His arms are outstretched to us in love.

But this is not just suffering that loves company.

For as we turn to him we are healed, we are saved.

For his death is not the last word; the last word is life, resurrection life, eternal life, that flows from the cross to us.

We are invited to look to Jesus to be healed.

This is the fourth Sunday in Lent, Palm Sunday is approaching, and Holy Week is drawing near.

We are invited in these weeks to contemplate the cross, to think deeply about the gift that is given.

And we are encouraged to invite others to join us.

There is something compelling and powerful about the message of the cross... there is something life giving in the forgiving love of Jesus.

Jesus said that he would draw people to himself when he was lifted up, and that he would save them.

The relentless love of God pursues all his people. Some will continue to hide in the shadows, but others would come if they were invited into the light.

If you reached out a hand, someone else might see the love of God made flesh, and turn and be saved.

Let us pray:

Holy God, give us eyes to see you lifted high on the cross, with arms outstretched in love and forgiveness. Lord, as we turn to you, we are healed, we are saved. There is life and hope found at the cross.

May we reach out to others, that you might draw them to yourself.

Amen