

Bennoch church 18th March 2012

You might be one of the few people who love snakes! I have never held a snake so I am not sure how I would react! I suppose it depends on what kind of snake it was. Was it poisonous or not? You also hear stories of snakes that can crush people or even able to eat large animals whole! So maybe it is fortunate that we do not have many native snakes in Scotland

However that is not the case if you happen to be journeying through a desert as Israel did for 40 years. The book of numbers takes us back into that desert experience and in chapter 21 we encounter a common problem. They had just got help from God to once again defeat their enemies, this time the Canaanite but then, they stated on their usual 'diet' of complaints. No food...no water... would it not be better...Egypt... life here is just miserable! I think we might have had a similar response. We do not like the difficult life and it is easy to look back to the good old days with rose tinted glasses on.

We are told in this story that God, to teach the people a lesson and help them recognise the sin of their complaints, sends in a bunch of poisonous snakes, many were bitten and died. Seems a bit drastic to me! I am glad God does not act like that today... or was it just a coincidence? I wonder if the same coincidences happen today? Or do we just not recognise the failure of our own actions?

Not surprisingly, they are brought to their senses. They don't seem to have a problem bringing these two things together, their failure and Gods judgement in the snakes, so the people come to Moses and ask him to pray to God and take the snakes away. He does so, but the action that follows is a strange one. The snakes are not taken away and healing comes through looking at a bronze snake on a pole. Look, be reminded and you shall be healed.

Travel through a thousand years and more and find yourself in Palestine at the time of Jesus. He has just had his famous encounter with the Jewish leader Nicodemus, who is struggling with the whole idea of being born anew. Why did Nicodemus come to Jesus, was he looking for a private theological discussion? He certainly got more than a cosy chat! Jesus told him quite clearly that the Kingdom of God is not about earthly birth, it is about spiritual re-birth which can be achieved by no human effort. And Nicodemus keeps asking, 'how will this be'? I am fairly certain if we were in his shoes we would have asked exactly the same questions! These are the things of heaven Jesus says, and there is only one who has been to heaven, and he came down from heaven.

And here is where the two stories intertwine. The snake raised by Moses and Christ raised on the cross, his means back to heaven. He uses the image to point to himself. The dynamic is the same, look, see, believe and be healed.

John 3: 16, maybe the most famous verse in scripture, expresses the action of Jesus being raised up for the world, this is how God loves the world. And whoever believes, now, present tense, has eternal life. It reminds me of Christian Aid's logo, "We believe in life before death". So does Jesus!

There is debate where the words of Jesus end and the commentary of the writer begins, but notice that Nicodemus has faded into the background and we are left with one of the great themes of John. The one lifted up is the light of the world, (1: 4-5, 8:12) and if there is judgement, it is in our own hands, depending whether we wish to be exposed to that light or not, and we will only do that, if we live a life of obedience to God. So, our actions confirm the spirit of light in our lives.

So we end focusing, as we should do, on the actions of God in Christ. Later on, Nicodemus does reappear briefly. Hunt those passages out and wonder this, did Nicodemus, through the Spirit of God in this encounter, come out of the darkness of the shadows of night and into the light, who is Jesus Christ, raised at Easter? Amen