

Handling snakes

I wonder if some of you might have seen a film from a few years back but which still gets shown occasionally, called *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Arc*. In it the hero and explorer Indiana Jones, who is played by Harrison Ford, is with his companions in some deep in some dark cave where they fall into a snake pit. They light a lantern and there, lo and behold, they see thousands of snakes writhing and crawling all over them. And Harrison Ford, terrified but trying desperately to sound brave, looks around and whispers, ‘Just remember, they’re more afraid of us than we are of them...!’

Well, I don’t think so. Snakes are scary and they can be exceedingly dangerous, just as they are in our story from the Book of Numbers this morning. And what has brought this plague of snakes upon the people of Israel? Well, of course, the Israelites have been doing what they do best and that is whinging and moaning. Out there is the desert it’s hot and they’re tired and while God has been providing food for them it seems that the menu is monotonous and suddenly selective memory kicks in – they forget about the hard labour and the whips and the brick quotas and the tyranny of Egypt and suddenly they’re reminiscing nostalgically about the good old days back there where there was food aplenty and the menu was rich and varied. At least you could get a decent meal there! So the ‘back to Egypt’ campaign gathers momentum and not for the first time God’s patience is exhausted and next thing there is this outbreak of deadly, venomous snakes that are biting people, and of course that provokes a change of tune in the people. All of a sudden they are contrite and they plead with Moses, this same Moses who they had just been blaming for everything, and they beg him to intercede with God to take away the snakes! And there then follows this extraordinary mechanism for healing those who are bitten. Moses must fashion a bronze serpent and put it on a pole and people who look up to it are healed.

So what are we to make of this story? It certainly seems bizarre, dominated as it is by this rather hideous spectacle of a bronze serpent entwined upon a pole. Is this some primitive totem, some ancient and archaic ritual? And why this means of healing people from the poison? Could not God have instructed them to make up some ointment from the leaves of a desert bush, or provided healing water in which to bathe the bites – something tactile like that,

involving touch? Why this snake lifted high on a pole that they only need to look at, they only need to raise their eyes up to, with no physical contact at all? Well, let me make a suggestion. What if these serpents that are suddenly amongst the people and biting them are actually external manifestations of the evil, the wickedness that is within them? What if the serpents that slither and threaten and pounce are actually expressions of the serpents that lie deep within their hearts? What if the poison that comes from the jaws of the snakes represents the poison that pulses through the bloodstream of the Israelites, deep within? After all, the serpent in the Bible has associations with evil – remember the serpent in the garden who tempted Adam and Eve. Indeed there too you could argue perhaps that that serpent was an external manifestation of the internal human tendency to question God, to rebel, to reject God. And if that is the case then what God is doing in commanding them to construct this serpent on a pole is bringing them face to face with what is destroying them. God is confronting them, holding up before them, a symbol of the evil that is within them. All their ingratitude for their liberation, their rejection of God, their antipathy to the ways of God, their addiction to Egypt and captivity – all that is poisoning them - is held up before them so that they can recognise it and confront it. And only then can they be healed.

Let me share with you something that has profoundly enriched my life recently and that I hope it is appropriate for me to mention it this morning as I think it's relevant here. As many of you know our church hall is let out to a number of organisations and it's my desire as the new minister of this church to make contact with them and introduce myself. Well, there is an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting that takes place early every morning there and they welcome visitors who are not alcoholics and I have been going along to that. The meeting includes a time of sharing in which people talk about their lives and their struggles and their determination to live in sobriety. And what amazes me about that time of sharing is the extraordinary level of self-knowledge, self-awareness, self-understanding that is revealed there. People who have sunk to the depths as many there have and who have reached rock bottom and who are now on the way up have often come face to face with themselves, with their demons, with their darkness – or to put it in terms of today's story, they have come face to face with their snakes. They have confronted the serpents that are destroying them. And in Alcoholics Anonymous they recognise that they are helpless without the help of the higher power of God, however they may

understand God, but healing does not come lightly or easily. Healing involves discerning and naming our serpents. It involves recognising how our internal snakes, the snakes that lurk in our hearts, are expressed outwardly in our behaviour. And until we recognise and name them the poison continues to spread with all its destructive effects. And as I listen to those recovering alcoholics as they share their stories and their insights and as they identify their serpents I recognise the snakes within my own heart and the way they find expression in my life. And thank God – and there but for the grace of God go I – my snakes have not poisoned my life with addiction to alcohol, but the poison works in other ways, of course.

This, surely, is one way of understanding Jesus' time of testing in the wilderness that we recall during this season of Lent. We read that after Jesus' baptism in the River Jordan the Holy Spirit drove Jesus out into the wilderness, there to be tempted by the devil. What's that all about? What was happening there? Well, the point is that Jesus was preparing there for his ministry, getting ready for his divine vocation of bringing God's Kingdom to bear upon the world. But in order to do that he had first to discern the serpents that lay deep in his heart - he had to recognise them before they found expression in his life, before they manifested themselves and then turned around and bit him. So those temptations levelled at Jesus were real. The devil was not playing games or going through the motions. There were real serpents there, lurking in Jesus' human heart, but out there in the desert they were discerned and identified and their power broken such that they never did find outward expression in Jesus' life. But of course what is so striking is the way that Jesus drew out the serpent in others. As we've been reading through Mark's Gospel in our Lent Bible studies we've noticed how often Jesus provoked those who were possessed by demons. He walks into a synagogue and suddenly there is this crazed man shouting 'what have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us?' He lands on a lake shore and suddenly a man emerges from the tombs, possessed by evil spirits and shouting, 'what have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God.' It's as if Jesus' very presence draws out the vipers! And as we saw in our study this week, from the midpoint in Mark's Gospel, chapter 8, Jesus begins to speak of his death and in the chapters that follow the opposition to him from the religious and political establishment gathers and intensifies as the snakes that lurk within are provoked and drawn out and they spread their deadly poison. And of course eventually, as Jesus

predicted, the serpents strike with their venomous spite and Jesus hangs on the cross, the victim of their poison. And so we find Jesus, with his wondrous imagination, linking his death on the cross with the story of the serpents. As we read in our passage from John's Gospel, '... just 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.' What an image on which to feed our imaginations! What an insight into the mystery of the cross!

You see, there, in Jesus' crucifixion, we come face to face with the evil that poisons the human race. There, on Calvary, we are confronted with the sin that lurks deep in the human heart, like a drunk being held under a cold tap. Having, in his ministry, drawn out the evil that dwells within us, there in Jesus' execution it is paraded before us. There we meet head-on our human antipathy towards God. There we see our deep resistance to the ways of God, to the things that lead to life. There we see our love affair with Egypt, with captivity, with death. It's all sucked out of us and held up before us. But because it has all been externalised and manifested and revealed, it can now be healed. The full expression of sin becomes the source of endless healing and salvation. The curse becomes the cure. Once it has been drawn out and held before our eyes it can be dealt with. Alleluia!

I wonder about the snakes in your life. I wonder what serpents lie deep within your heart and how they got there. What is it that life does to us that breeds these vipers within us? But do we even know they're there? Do we recognise them? And how do they manifest themselves? How do they take expression, poisoning our lives, our relationships? Attending these meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous these past weeks I have found myself wishing that we had similar meetings as Christians, only we would take a cue from our story this morning and we would talk not about our addiction to alcohol but our addiction to Egypt, to captivity, and all that Egypt stands for. I think it's great that in these AA meetings whenever someone speaks they always identify themselves as an alcoholic. 'I'm Fred, I'm an alcoholic'. 'I'm Liz, I'm an alcoholic'. Only in our meetings we would say, 'I'm Lance and I'm a sinner' and we would go on to talk honestly about our struggles with our serpents. And maybe if we did that the church might become less of a haven for the good and the upright and more of a refuge for sinners and the lost.

Lent is a time for self-examination. It's a season for serpent-grappling. May God grant you self-awareness, self-understanding. May God grant you

deep insight into the depths of what lies deep within you. Then look up – look up to that figure on the cross and receive the fullest measure of salvation and healing. Amen.

O holy and loving God,
eternal and sovereign Lord,
you are worthy of all praise and worship,
you who reveals yourself too us.
We glimpse you in the wonder of the world around us,
in the beauty of the earth and the glory of spring
and in the delights of human love.
But we see you revealed supremely in
a figure on a cross, high and lifted up,
like a snake on a stick,
hoisted high for all to see,
the target of human hatred and rejection.
And the sight of that cross brings to mind

our sin and our shame,
our resistance to you and your claim upon us.
O God have mercy upon us.
Cleanse and forgive us for our sin
and renew in us we pray the gift of eternal life.
Speak to us words of grace.
Reassure us of your patience with us,
Of your long suffering and steadfast love
And call us once more into the life of freedom
That is your gift to us in Jesus Christ.
We pray all these things in his name. Amen.