

Fourth Sunday in Lent

Fourth Sunday in Lent – 11 March 2018

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to thank Rev Colin Sinclair, Minister of Palmerston Place Church, Edinburgh, for his thoughts on the fourth Sunday in Lent.

Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.

Contents

Introduction	2
Numbers 21:4-9	2
Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22	3
Ephesians 2:1-10	4
John 3:14-21	4
Sermon ideas	5
Time with children	6
Prayers	6
Musical suggestions	11

Introduction

Lent is a journey to the Cross. On this fourth Sunday of Lent we are well on our way, but, like the children of Israel, can easily lose our way when we have started, but the end is still some way off. The readings from Numbers, the Psalms and the Gospel all refer to the same incident and our reading in Ephesians gives some theological perspective on what it reveals, both of the human condition and of God's grace in salvation.

[Numbers 21:4-9](#)

I suspect that if this story was not used in John chapter 3 to help understand why Jesus came, many of us would have been unaware of it or simply noted it in the passing. Snakes are not good news for many, who simply fear them and the story will make them squirm. Once again, the children of God do not emerge with flying colours. Despite all that they have seen and heard, despite all that has happened to them, they have returned to their default position of grumbling and complaining. The focus was both on God and God's appointed leader Moses. How quickly grumbling drives out gratitude. They were called to be a light to the nations but instead were casting a shadow of gloom around everything. The reason for their grumbling is found in the previous chapter. Israel has been four decades in the wilderness. At last, the time has come to advance towards the Promised Land along the King's Highway ([20:17](#)) running north from the Gulf of Aqaba ('the Red Sea', v 4) – but any optimism was shattered by the refusal of the king of Edom to grant Israel passage ([20:14–21](#)). The prospect of a long detour proved too much. The brittle morale of the people collapsed into bitter complaint against God and Moses (v 5). But God loved them enough not to let them get away with such childish and immature behaviour. "You want to grumble? I will give you something to grumble about", was in effect God's response. How terrifying the invasion of snakes must have been (cf Hitchcock's "The Birds"). Silently, from all directions, they invaded the sprawling camp. The first time that many people were aware of them was when they were bitten and the poison led to death. What a judgement on the people of God. Yet they did not attribute this event to "bad luck" or "a dangerous place". They knew their attitude had provoked a response, and not for the first time. Moses may have been the focus of their criticism but he was also their only hope. With no excuses and desperate to save themselves and their families, they confessed how their words had caused this catastrophe. If only we were always so aware of the damage our words can cause. The old saying: "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me" is simply not true. Decades later we can recall words that belittled us, that penetrated our defences and stunted our development. Moses did not take the huff, nor use the situation to give a lecture. Instead he prayed. Here comes the strange part. Instead of the snakes just going away, the Israelites' salvation would be found in an act of faith. A bronze

snake was put on a pole and raised up in the centre of the camp. The instruction was clear. If you are bitten you only need to look to the snake and you will be healed. If you dismissed this as nonsense, if you tried other ways of fighting the venom, if you simply lay down in your tent then fine, but in the end you would die. Only those who put their faith in God's way of salvation would find life. The same is still true today. It was of course God, not the snake, that healed them. (In fact this story is mentioned in the Apocrypha, making exactly that point; [Wisdom of Solomon 16:7](#)). In this incident, Moses points us to Christ in two ways. First, he reflects the spirit of Jesus. Like Jesus, he intercedes for those who spitefully used him and blesses those who had cursed him ([1 Peter 2:23](#); see [Matthew 5:44](#)). Second, Moses prefigures the death of Jesus. He hoists the bronze snake on a pole, and all who look at the snake live. In these two ways Moses is our example. He calls us to forgive our personal enemies and to pray for them. He urges us to lift up the Christ who was lifted up on the cross by sharing the good news with others.

[Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22](#)

The Psalmist uses the story of the people of God to teach them to trust in God's goodness, to believe in God's love and so to give thanks to the Lord. The section of the story for this week focuses on their time in the wilderness and on events such as those we read about in Numbers 21. The notions of freedom from slavery, of being caught up in the purpose of God, of being affirmed as God's children, of having a future and a hope seemed to be less attractive when there was an extra distance to travel, a shortage of food or a limited menu. That still remains true today. We may value forgiveness of sins, adoption into God's family, being justified by faith and all the blessings of our faith. However the rubber hits the road if the homes we live in, the food we eat or the car we drive are not to our satisfaction. You can expect complaints to follow fairly speedily. How unattractive people of faith can quickly become. No wonder there was a children's chorus "Count your blessings, name them one by one" – for the simple reason that we take blessings for granted and still prefer to grumble. However, the Psalmist makes it clear that judgement is "God's strange work", whose instinct is always to reconcile and deliver. God will not turn a deaf ear to their cries but hears them and responds. In place of distress was deliverance, in exchange for trouble came trust. From such stories the people of God are called, not simply to have 20:20 vision in hindsight with God, but to trust God day by day for the future as well. God's faithfulness in the past should inspire their worship and lead them to be willing to live as thankful people... until the next time!

[Ephesians 2:1-10](#)

In each of the previous readings the pattern of judgment and salvation has been played out. Here, in part of Paul's magisterial epistle, the same drama is given theological edge. The hinge comes in the words "But God" in v4. Here is the great reversal brought about by God's initiative and intervention. Here is a need big enough to require the action of a god. The old trio of "the flesh, the world and the devil" all appear in various forms in the first three verses and the result is a sorry one. Sin has consequences, whether we are caught or not. It changes our DNA, leaving us insensitive – in other words, "dead" to God. We cannot tune in to God, who is remote to us, whose word is boring, and whose people are dull. We follow other paths, which promise freedom, but in the end enslave and dehumanise, leaving us distant from God and disobedient. When things couldn't get any worse, God steps in, in the person of Jesus – whose death for us, in our place and for our sakes, offers hope and whose resurrection provides a prototype of a new way of life and a new way of living. Death, resurrection and exaltation, all part of the great drama of salvation, are not simply the experience of Christ but can also be the experience of Christians. And it is all of grace. How unpleasant the next life would be if it were based on merit, full of proud, strutting people boasting of their achievements. But that is not God's way. It is a way of grace through faith lest anyone should boast. The faith that saves us also moves us to live dedicated, thankful lives, giving ourselves gladly in service to God and to others. To God be the glory.

[John 3:14-21](#)

We are not now in a desert but in a city, not with the children of God but with one person, Nicodemus. "The teacher of Israel" is at a loss as to what to make of Jesus. The conversation, which takes place away from the crowd and late at night, is also one that he finds it hard to get his head around. So Jesus seeks to anchor his teaching by referring to the old story from the book of Numbers, which would be familiar to them both. Salvation then came when faith was put in a central figure (a bronze snake) that was lifted up in their midst. Salvation would come again when another figure would be raised on a pole (the cross) and be the focus of all eyes. Belief begins by looking in the right place, and that means looking to see Jesus lifted up on the cross. Looking at Jesus we believe in Him, and believing in Him we receive eternal life. At the time, some would look in cruel delight at having got Jesus where they wanted Him. Some would look out of pity, that anyone would suffer in such a way. Some would look out of curiosity, mesmerised by human suffering. No-one that day would have understood what was happening other than the apparent triumph of evil, disguised by legal process and the end of their dreams and hopes. But things would change and the resurrection would cast new light on the events, which would be rebadged

as Good Friday. As the words on one of the verses of the Easter hymn, “There is a green hill far away”, puts it:

“He died that we might be forgiven,
He died to make us good,
that we might go at last to heaven,
saved by His precious blood.”

The rest of our reading seeks to explain the events on which we focus on our journey through Lent. While Jesus died, as Peter would say “at the hands of wicked men” (Acts 2:23), God was not taken by surprise or wrong-footed. It is God’s love that led Jesus to come. It is God’s love that allowed Jesus to set His face towards Jerusalem. It is God’s love that prevented Jesus calling on angels to rescue Him. His death was their life – the divine exchange. Jesus came that we might fulfil our destiny both here on earth and later in glory. His intention was salvation first, judgement second. Light has come but light also deepens the darkness. Everyone has a choice – to turn to the light or to turn away from it, to live by the truth or to choose the way of lies, the mask, the spin. Only one way leads to life, the other death. We need to choose wisely as we journey to the foot of the cross. One of the great paradoxes of this Gospel is that the moment of apparent shame is the moment of supreme glory. In being lifted up, Jesus draws all people to him (see [12:32](#)). We who believe identify with both the shameful suffering and the glorious victory ([Romans 8:17](#)).

Sermon ideas

All these great passages are invitations to preach without any reference to anything else, but of course there is a great deal of overlap. However the theme of journey fits well with the season of Lent; the story set in the desert sits well with the temptations in the wilderness; and the reference to the Cross reminds us of where this season leads us to. It is a good week to be a preacher!

Time with children

When there is a story waiting to be told I would tell it. The story of the bronze snake in the wilderness is one that lends itself to imagination and re-telling.

You could describe:

- How the people had got fed up going on an endless journey – cf children: “Are we nearly there yet?” and getting out of sorts in the back of the car
- How they all started to grumble and complain, and how we can often do the same
- How the snakes came and how scary that was and how the people were frightened and didn’t know where to turn or what to do, and that some who were bitten got sick and didn’t get better
- How the leaders went to Moses and asked them to pray to God for help and the strange answer he received, to erect a bronze snake in their midst.

Perhaps you could describe how a boy or a girl got bitten by a snake and their parents were worried sick as they cared for them in their tent, but saw him getting worse not better.

- You could tell how the news came that could be healed but they had to get to a place where they could see the snake and, in looking there, healing would come from God.
- Perhaps their mother was reluctant to move them, as they were so ill. Perhaps it was the sister or brother of the sick child who encouraged them to do what Moses had said and how, when they did, healing came.

Application: What do we do when things go wrong, when we spoil things by what we say or how we react? We can sort things out, not by looking at a bronze snake, but by remembering that Jesus, who loves us, came to sort us out from the inside out, to forgive us for things we have said and done and get us back on our feet again. We need to trust Him and remember that Jesus died on the cross for us so that we might find forgiveness for things that have gone wrong and live a different way in His strength. So, like the children in the story, we need to look to Him and He will give us life.

Prayers

Collect for the day

Gracious Father,
Your blessed Son, Jesus Christ, came from heaven
to be true bread which gives life to the world.
Evermore give us this bread

that He may live in us, and we in Him,
who lives and reigns
with You and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Opening Prayer

Eternal and ever-blessed God,
We give You thanks that You have gathered us
within this place today;
that we can lift our voices in praise,
bring our prayers to You together
and hear Your word and respond to Your gospel.

So accompany us,
that our minds may be enlightened by Your truth,
our hearts may be warmed with Your love,
our lives may be empowered by Your grace;
so that we may go from this place
to love You and our neighbour more.

Forgive us for the broken promises
when we did not count the cost
and it was harder to keep them than we thought.

Forgive us for the promises that we have made
And then forgotten about.

Forgive us for the things we have left half-done
because of the lack of perseverance.

Forgive us for the things we have not even attempted,
for the things we were afraid to do,
for the things we were too lazy to try ,
for the things we put off from day to day
until we never do them.

Living God, perhaps we should have done so much more
with the talents that You have given to us.
Perhaps we should have worked harder to turn dreams into reality.

Help us to use the time that remains to us well
so that we may be able to say at the end,
“I have finished the work that You have given me.”

Loving God, grant to us
strength to bear our burdens and not to faint or fall,
strength to conquer our temptations and do what is right,
strength to walk with You each day throughout our lives
until we reach our journey’s end.

Hear these prayers, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen

Dedication of the offering

O God our Father
accept these offerings
brought in this and other ways
and so take us and use us
that in Your service we may find our freedom
and in doing Your will, we may find our peace
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen

Prayer of intercession

Gracious God,
bless those who are looking in the wrong direction,
those who are living in the past,
those for whom all the good days lie far behind,
those who are trapped in nostalgia
and who live simply with their memories.

We pray for those who have allowed some sorrow
to darken their whole horizon
and to let the sun set on their hopes and dreams,
for those who have allowed some disappointment
to sour rather than let them grow,
for those who have allowed some quarrel to create a gulf
that they will not even try to bridge.

We pray for those who are living in the future,
for those who are always putting things off
until a more convenient time,
for those who are waiting and not working,
for those who are hoping but not striving,
for those who have mistaken dreams for deeds.

We pray for those who think of their problems
but who never think to turn to You,
for those who tease at their worries
till they cannot even sleep,
for those who are conscious of their weakness
but have forgotten Your all sufficient grace,
for those who think of the things they might lose,
but who never think of the things that cannot be taken from them.

We pray for those who seek their pleasures
in ways that can only bring regret,
for those for whom what they have and own and keep
are the most important things in the world,
for those who think money can buy all that they need
if only they had enough of it,
for those who are driven by ambitions
that will not let them rest.

We pray for those who are such slaves of their work
that their families hardly see anything of them,
for those who drive themselves so hard
that when they are at home
they are so tired they are either irritable or fall asleep,
for those who have not time to rest and relax
and enjoy the people they love,
doing ordinary things
and sometimes, simply doing nothing.

We pray for those who are ill or in pain,
for those in hospitals or receiving care at home
for those for whom the way back to health

is a long hard road,
for those who know that there is no healing for them,
that they may play out their last act with courage and with faith.

We pray for those suffering from memory loss and for their carers,
for all who are suffering from mental health problems;
give them the support that they need
and understanding and compassion from the wider community.

Bless those who are elderly, especially those who live alone
who rarely have a conversation with another,
for those who are not able to easily get out of their homes
and can easily feel that no-one cares.

Bless each one of us
whatever our situation, whatever our need.
Help us to set our hearts on things above where Christ is
and find in Him a rock on which we can build our lives.

Hear these, our prayers, through Jesus Christ our lord.
Amen

Musical suggestions

- CH4 457 – “All hail the power of Jesus’ name”
- CH4 555 – “Amazing grace”
- CH4 396 – “And can it be”
- CH4 374 – “From heaven you came”
- CH4 180 – “Give thanks with a grateful heart”
- CH4 549 – “How deep the Father’s love for us”

Mission Praise

- MP 481 – “Name of all majesty”
- MP 750 – “What kind of love is this”
- MP 914 – “Only by grace can we enter”