

## Lent 4 – Wesley Services – 18<sup>th</sup> March 2012 -DT

Readings: Numbers 21:4-9 & John 3:14-21

Theme: “The power of God’s love”

### Introduction

As we come to the Scriptures for today it is intriguing that we have an account in Numbers 21 which could almost be construed as the forming of an idol after last week’s Ten Commandments reading which clearly bans the making and/or the worship of idols. The account of Moses being told by God to in fact make an image of a serpent and place it on a pole and to get the people to look upon it for healing is quite remarkable. The much maligned snake from Genesis now becomes a symbol of healing in the desert for the people of God. This symbolism is still used by the medical profession to this day, but for many they wouldn’t realise where it has come from. In the Navy the Medics have the snake to show that they are part of the health care professionals. It is their core symbol. Fascinating to see where the imagery comes from. But there is more to this passage so let’s look at it and the Gospel as there is linkage between the two.

### Numbers 21:4-9

This is one of the ‘murmuring accounts or stories’ where the Israelites complained about their condition in the desert. Their failure to trust God and God’s intermediary, Moses, is the basic issue. This is also seen in other complaint stories in Numbers chapters 11, 14, 16 and 20. Hence it is not a new issue but comes to a climax here.

Moses was looking to help the people to move forward, trusting that God would lead them to a new land as promised. In the preceding verses in Numbers 21:1-3 they had just won a victory over the Canaanites after seeking divine assistance. You would think they would have been grateful, praising God rather than complaining and grumbling against God and Moses. It is as if God says, well I’ll give them something to really grumble about and they run into a mob of poisonous snakes that begin killing all that are bitten.

It is into this context that Moses prays for the people and God answers that faithful prayer with the call to make a healing image of a snake. The people recognise their sinfulness against God and it is in a repentant way that Moses prays for them.

Sometimes, we are like the people of God in the desert, complaining about this and that, instead of giving thanks for what we have and getting on with being part of God’s faithful people. Sometimes we simply want signs and wonders instead of accepting that we are part of God’s people whether or not there are signs and wonders.

### John 3:14 -21

In the Gospel reading from John we have the second part of Jesus’ nocturnal discussions with Nicodemus. John 3:2 suggests that Nicodemus represents those drawn to Jesus by the signs that he is doing. This verse says: “For no-one

could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.” Jesus interrupts him to say that faith based on signs/miracles etc is quite inadequate and goes on to talk about being born ‘afresh or anew’ before talking to Nicodemus about the first of three passion or cross predictions which is in vss 14-15. Here is the link between the Hebrew Scriptures and the Gospel. The Jews knew the Moses and the snake story from the book of Numbers but had never aligned it with what Jesus was about to say concerning the Messiah, the promised of God, or his own description of himself as the Son of Man. Jesus draws an analogy between the “lifting up” of the Son of Man and Moses lifting up the bronze serpent in the desert so that all that look to the serpent might be saved from death from poisonous snakebites. In like manner the Son of Man must be “lifted up” so that “whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” Notice the clear parallels in structure and dramatic differences in context:

Numbers 21 – Look at the serpent and live.

John 3 – Believe in the Son of Man and live eternally.

The Son of Man does not just offer life; the Son of Man offers eternal life. But it is not enough to look at the Son of Man; we are called to believe in him. In John ‘believe’ is an action verb. It is something you do and cannot be reduced to cognitive affirmation. Hence belief is lived out in life and leads to eternal life. Pretty heavy Christian stuff!

It is in this belief context that we then have one of the best known verses of Jesus’ teaching in John 3:16 “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that who-ever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

God’s motivating force behind the cross is love. It is also the ‘why’ of Jesus’ ministry. A ministry to show the love of God at work even unto the cross.

### Conclusion

We are on this 40 day journey with Jesus through Lent leading to the cross of Good Friday and the empty tomb of Resurrection Sunday, Easter Day.

In today’s readings we have some of the background to that. The Hebrew Scriptures shed light upon this Gospel passage from John 3.

In our Lenten journeying we are called to put aside our grumbling and praise God for the many blessings given, some of which we will not even recognize.

Also we are called to take stock of our spiritual lives and see the power of the cross as a sign of God’s love and forgiveness. As we heard last Sunday, the cross is foolishness to some but a sign of life and hope to those who are being saved through it.

Lent is a perfect time to consider our obedience to God and make changes appropriately within our lives.

Also we have learnt that the snake becomes a symbol of healing through the Numbers reading which is still in the medical sphere today.

Amen.