

Lent 4 Year B - 2021

This story of Moses and the Israelites in the dessert seems, at first reading, just another myth or a fairy tale from Jewish history - perhaps a recording of 'the old days' when people believed in magic - and we have come a long way since then - the Renaissance, the Age of Reason, the Scottish Enlightenment and even the 'post-modern' era when the only way to think about anything is to Google it - Google can answer any question you might have - even what to preach about on the fourth Sunday in Lent, Year B!

But I didn't find this sermon on the internet - I found it in the Bible readings which we have just heard - because, strange as it may seem, although clearly it is not so strange, it is intended, these three readings all hang together and speak of the same thing - grace.

The concept of grace is so easy - you can grab hold of it, just as you can grab a little eel swimming up a river - so easy to grab hold of, so hard to keep hold of as it slips away and you have to try again. But listen to St Paul - Ephesians 2, v5 'by grace you have been saved'; v7 'so that God might show the immeasurable

riches of his grace'; v8 'For by grace you have been saved through faith'.

So what has grace to do with the wanderers who are in the dessert struggling with thirst and the monotony of eating only manna every day - and then an infestation of poisonous snakes? Fed up with everything they turn on Moses and accuse him of bringing them into the wilderness to die. Absent from their thoughts are any recollection of their gracious deliverance from slavery by the hand of God. Gone are all thoughts of the covenant they entered into at Sinai. Forgotten is the divine promise that they are to be God's chosen, holy nation and a kingdom of priests. Their present condition, their discomfort and suffering rob them of the memory of God's gracious redemption and faithful day by day guidance of them. But when the snakes come, they turn to Moses, and Moses turns to God, who, because of grace, because of mercy, provides a means of healing. The bronze serpent which Moses creates is not magic; it is a sign of God's love for those who trust in him. They have to look, but they have to look through the eyes of faith - if they believe God will save them, God will save them. This is the grace which Paul writes about to the Ephesians. He hammers home the message

that human sin results in spiritual death; in sin we are stuck, helpless, dead. But God scoops us up, redeems us and loves us – it is by grace that we have been saved. Paul wags a finger at us and says 'it is not about your works – you don't have a leg to stand on or a single thing to be proud of in terms of your salvation – it is all grace.' 'For by grace you were saved through faith and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God and not the result of works'. But then Paul immediately tells us that we 'are created in Christ Jesus for good works'.

It is the ultimate paradox of the Gospel – we are not saved by good works but *for* good works. God does not care what shape we are in when he saves us, but does very much care about the shape of our lives after he saves us. As Jesus says 'if you love me you will keep my commandments', not 'if you keep my commandments I will love you'. God's grace does not only wipe out our past, it opens to us a new future.

And that is a source of hope, a hope that is built of the words that Jesus speaks to Nicodemus. 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son'. Not 'God loved the church', or 'God loved those that do good' or 'God loved repentant sinners' or 'God loved those who ticked all the right boxes'. 'God so loved the world',

the dirty, damaged, conflicted world. He loved it – and loves it – just as it is – full of anger and contradictions, capable of the best and the worst of all things, a world which can feel lost, alone, forsaken. God wraps this world around with his love. We call that grace, for we have done nothing to deserve it. And Jesus is the gift that God has given to the world. Like Israelites looking at the bronze serpent and trusting God to heal them, we can look at Christ lifted on the cross, and trust God to heal our broken lives – and then we can step out and do what Paul calls 'good works' – to proclaim the love of God by word and deed. And if God does not denounce and condemn, who are we to do precisely that? We can only call one another to conversion – and conversion is a daily, not a one off, event. We can only call one another to conversion with hearts full of love not minds full of judgement. I suppose we can all look into our own hearts and see, if we are honest, that there is a mixture of good and bad within us. All of us live ambiguous lives, sometimes living the life of God, eyes firmly fixed on the cross, and sometimes destroying the world we are trying to create.

If we are to fulfil our purpose we need the healing grace of God. And fulfilling our purpose can, at times, seem a hopelessly

difficult task, and if we depend on our own efforts the task will be impossible. But, thank God, he reaches in and plucks us out of the messes we make and fills us with his grace, nourishing us with word and sacrament.

Giving ourselves up to the love of God can appear to be a frightening process, because it means we have to let go of the total control we love. But if we can only let go and say 'Okay, you are in charge', we will not be disappointed.

Ultimately - all is grace.