

MORNING SERVICE

22 March 2009, Kilcalmonell, Killean & Kilchenzie

4th Sunday of Lent

Mother's Day

preacher: Rev Martin Grashoff

hymns: Church Hymnary. Fourth Edition (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005)

Welcome & Intimations

Opening Hymn : 'We turn to God' (CH 393)

Children's Talk

Children's Hymn : 'Jesus' hands were kind hands' (CH 351)

Prayer & Lord's Prayer

Readings : Numbers 21:4-9 (*Good News Bible*) & John 3:14-21 (*New Jerusalem Bible*)

Hymn : 'O Love that wilt not let me go' (CH 557)

Sermon

Today the Lectionary has led us to some interesting readings. Is it an ancient story full of magic we read from Numbers? And how to understand these almost judgmental words from Jesus?

An great-aunt of mine – auntie Gre (that would be Margaret in Scotland) – had a strong preference for [homeopathy](#), the alternative medicine that is based on the principle of 'like cures like'. She also believed in self-medication and in the end she had a huge collection of different tinctures, pills, granules and balsams. Since she grew very old, she may have mixed them all up in her last years.

Homeopathy is still controversial, especially seen from the perspective of established medicine. The use of your common sense is advisable (although that applies to all medicine). Still, that principle of 'treating like with like' is interesting, I think. If you suffer from a fear of heights, you could decide to live in The Netherlands, but you could also try to gradually move your boundaries. That is often how therapies deal with it: step by step adding a bit more.

In a way this is what seems to happen to the people of Israel in that peculiar story about the bronze snake. It is a story with double layers in it. If we would only read it as a report of a miracle, we would miss the point.

What is happening?¹ The people of Israel still drag themselves through the wilderness. They have been doing that for too many years now. And now they have to get the land of Edom as well. It is too much and something snaps. And as they did before they start

¹ For the following paragraphs inspiration was found in Nico ter Linden, *Het verhaal gaat...* 1: De Thora (Amsterdam: Balans, 1996) p285f.

to complain – in old King James Bible language: they *murmur*. ‘Moses! Why did you... wish we were... we should have... if you hadn’t...’ It is that typical, obscure, but really poisonous talk we all know. You cannot get hold of it, so you cannot reply, and it kills the last bit of faith and trust. Sneaky – no, snaky. They really have become a *brood of vipers*.²

And they know it. When the real snakes sneak into the camp and start to bite and kill, they say it is a punishment from God. They really don’t think this is a coincidence. They see a direct connection between their viperous behaviour and the vipers crawling round their tents.

This is probably where we start to find the story becoming uncanny. We are happy to believe a lot, but we don’t believe in magic. We might think this is pretty primitive thinking. Is it? Would there be no connection between our own behaviour and the accidents that hit us? Would the things that coincide with our path through life always be sheer coincidence?

Moses intercedes for the people. God’s answer is slightly surprising. ‘Magnify these vipers, make it a big, bronze snake, and lift it high on a stake.’ There it is again: the snake. It took Eve and Adam by surprise, now it’s back. The only remedy is to look it straight into the face. The viperous evil of gossip and murmuring cannot stand the light of day or honesty. Once you face it, it will cease. After all, to see sin is a healthy thing. Understanding the source of evil, can become the source of healing.

For some time *The Herald* website had an advertisement about dealing with personal debts. A man was walking followed by an ever growing ghost, named ‘Debt’. In the end the ghost threatened to jump on him. But as soon as the man turned around and looked his problem into the face, the ghost shrunk to something he could deal with. Walking away doesn’t work, was the message. Looking at it realistically, and finding good help, does work.

This is probably why Jesus brings up this old story in his nightly session with Nicodemus. ‘Victor of the people’ is the meaning of his name. But in this case it is the people in the story who teach him a lesson. The lesson has two tracks.

The first track is to recognise who the *son of man* is. Many translations write this in capital letters, making it a kind of divine title for Jesus. That is unfortunate. It just is a Hebrew way of saying ‘human being’. Like Adam and Eve, like each of us. It is the identity that Jesus fully shares with us. We are all sons and daughters of man.³

But what makes a man human? Ultimately that we all represent the image of God. That is not something we can take for granted. Like the people of Israel we can be very good at grunting, complaining, gossiping, and so on. We all have the capability of

² Matthew 3:7.

³ I do apologise for the inconvenience of the English language in merging the meanings ‘man’ and ‘human being’ into that one word ‘man’ – as does the French ‘homme’ – and not providing an equivalent for the Greek ἄνθρωπος, the Latin ‘homo’, the German ‘Mensch’ or the Dutch ‘mens’...

Cain to kill others, or to make life impossible. Like Adam and Eve we know how to blame others and think of ourselves as gods.

Now the testimony of the Gospel is that Jesus was not like that. His words and his works fully reflected the image of God that made him truly human. In a way he was beyond good and evil, living so close to God that his humanity made the greatest difference in history.

But – and this brings us to the second track in the story – this greatness was disguised. It can only be seen if we focus on the light. However, for many reasons we often choose to keep on the dark side. We might call that ‘being realistic’ or ‘using our common sense’. Jesus says we have to stop doing that and learn to love the light.

Moses magnifies evil, put it on a stake and makes the people face it. That is a very direct way to cure them. They now know what is wrong and what to do to overcome it.

Jesus teaches Nicodemus to focus on the light. That is an act of faith, but an act that should be done in the middle of daily life. Covered by the darkness of the night Nicodemus secretly went to Jesus to be taught. Throughout the night he is learning that he should live in the light of God by doing the right things in daily life. Being just, avoiding to harm others or creation, living on love, stop living in fear. That is about lifestyle, about commitment – well, it’s just about life as it is.

May we dare to look evil in the face – and quietly deal with it. But moreover, may we learn to love the light Jesus brings on behalf of God – and live in it.

Amen.

Hymn : ‘The great love of God’ (CH 358)

Offering brought forward

Prayer of Intercession

Closing Hymn : ‘Christ’s is the world’ (CH 724)

Blessing