

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent, 11th March 2018

Numbers 21:4-9, Ephesians 2:1-10, John 3:14-21 - Being Uplifted

'And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,' [John 3:14]. What on earth is that all about? We will of course get on to *'God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish...'*, but what is all this 'lifting up'? The story of the serpent is a reference to the Book of Numbers, chapter 21 in the Old Testament. The Israelites had come out of Egypt and complained that there was nothing to eat in the promised land.

"Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.' So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, 'Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.' So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live."

In Jewish tradition being 'lifted up' was usually shameful. The ultimate kind of being 'lifted up' was of course crucifixion on a cross, but also it could apply to being hanged. It had connotations of disgrace and it was the lowest form of death, of the death penalty. The fiery serpent seemed to be bad - it was lifted up on a pole - but it had healing power. So would Jesus, being lifted up, crucified, but yet having power to heal and save.

We are two weeks away from Easter now. Holy Week is the week after next. We are beginning to concentrate our thoughts on the momentous events which are summed up in this most famous line in the whole Bible, *'For God so loved the world...'* in our Gospel reading today.

But I am not going to spend time this morning exploring the meaning of Jesus' death on the cross. I'm using a neutral term, 'death' on the cross, neutral in the sense that I'm not talking about a 'sacrifice' or 'atonement.' Those are the terms which we will have to explore in much more detail, and I will certainly be doing that in other sermons around Easter, starting tonight at Evensong.

But I am interested this morning in the next verse in our Gospel, *'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.'* Talking about whether He 'condemns the world' makes this, in a way, another version of the story of the Last Judgement.

During the week, if you have been to one or other of the Churches Together Lent course [D. Gamble and J. Young et al (2004) 'Better Together', York, York Courses] meetings, this week you will have had a session about 'strangers.' The course is all about relationships, relationships with different kinds of people, family, church, strangers. How we meet, how we deal with, how we welcome, and indeed how we don't welcome, different kinds of people, including strangers.

One of the lessons which was read this week was the story of the great judgement, the division between the sheep and goats, in St Matthew's Gospel, Chapter 25, where Jesus says, *'I was a stranger and you took me in...'* And the righteous asked, *'When did we see you, a stranger, and took you in?'* And as you will remember, the King answered and said to them, *'Truly I say to you, as much as you have done it to one of the least of these brothers, you have done it to me.'* Well, I suggest that this lesson in St John's Gospel is another version of the same thing. Think what it says.

Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. [John 3:18-19] 'Condemned; judgement': they are words from the End Time, from the Last Judgement.

At the Lent course it was pointed out that, in deciding how to separate the sheep from the goats, the question, whether you were going to be a sheep or a goat, didn't depend on whether you were a good person or not, whether you had done good things or not. The criterion was whether you had followed our Lord's commands, and in particular whether you had followed the command to love: to love your neighbour. So indeed they could be real sinners, bad people, criminals; but they had repented, and shown love to their fellow man or woman; and, even despite their terrible crimes in the past, they could still be chosen out as sheep, and be saved.

This came as news to some of the people in the group. Indeed when we started talking about strangers, there were one or two people who turned the conversation straight on to immigrants and refugees and who suggested that the government had 'not been tough enough' in keeping these people out: that what was needed was stronger government. I was a little bit tempted to enquire whether they were looking for the trains to run on time too. But I resisted the temptation.

But this is rather important. If you are one of those people who want to restrict immigration, I think you have to be very careful, if you are also professing to be a Christian, to examine your reasons for wanting to do that: make sure that you are not in fact disobeying Jesus' commandment, to love your neighbour as yourself. Because your neighbour, your neighbour could well be an immigrant - even, you know, an economic migrant - or a person with a different faith, a Muslim or a Hindu, and they might not even speak very good English.

Nevertheless, there they are, they are strangers in our midst. They are our neighbours, and Jesus' commandment is absolutely clear: you are to love them, love them as though they were you. No ifs, no buts, no question whether it costs too much; if you worry about the cost of doing the right thing, then indeed, look again at this famous verse, 3-16 in St John's Gospel.

'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...' That must be the most costly gift that anyone could possibly give. God is prepared to spend without counting the cost. What does that mean for us?

Jesus' teaching, as reported in St John's Gospel, is that salvation comes through being in the light, and the light showing that what you do is good. At first blush it looks a bit as though this contradicts what Jesus said in the sheep and goats passage. There, it depended on whether you had shown love, whether you have been a good neighbour; but here it looks as though it depends on whether you have done good deeds. Actually this is not the case. The right way to look at it is that if you have seen the light, then you will naturally want to do good things.

And in our first lesson, St Paul writes, in the letter to the Ephesians, *'... by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works....'* [Ephesians 2:8-9] The idea is that you do not get to heaven by doing good deeds, but rather by your faith, by your trust in Jesus. If you have faith, then you will naturally do good things. *'...you*

have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works.'

Of course it works in reverse as well. If you don't have faith, if you are, as St Paul put it in his letter to the Ephesians, '*...dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air ... in the passions of [your] flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses..'*' if you behave in that way, your sins will find you out. If you act as though you do not believe, then it is reasonable to infer that you don't. Although good deeds will not get you into heaven by themselves, doing bad things in a way which suggests that you do not care about other people and have no love to share is a sign that you do not have faith, that you do not believe.

So frankly, my reading of what Jesus, as reported by Matthew, John and St Paul, what Jesus taught is, that you can't be a true Christian and not want to welcome the stranger, the refugee, the asylum seeker - even the economic migrant - if he is in our midst. It really doesn't matter how he got there. Give him your coat. Open your door. Welcome him in.

Because, he could just be Jesus himself.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant

[After I preached this, I learned about a vote in Parliament on 15th March on a Bill to allow parents to join refugee children who are already in the UK on their own. See <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/mar/30/ministers-urged-to-end-cruel-policy-on-child-refugees-family-members> and <https://services.parliament.uk/bills/2017-19/refugeesfamilyreunionno2.html>. Perhaps we should write to our MP Dominic Raab, to ask him to support the Bill.]