

Sunday 22 March 2009: Fourth Sunday of Lent

The Serpent and the Rod

Numbers 21:4-9, John 3:14-21

Serpenty serpents, pharmacies and strong medicine

I find it hard to stop staring at the story of the serpent and the rod. The idea that in the teeth of the Israelites grumbling in their wilderness ‘God, what are you doing, giving us this awful heavenly food and drink the whole time’ – I’ll come back to that phenomenon – God should be seen to send a plague of snakes to bite them in punishment, and then to save them from it by setting up a symbol which looks remarkably like the ancient Greek symbol of Asclepius – the god of healing.

Given the history around graven images, the tendency to want magic not faith which we’ve already seen with the golden calf, and the struggle to leave behind pagan idols, we might ask, ‘What exactly does God think God is doing?’ As if we didn’t know this was going to happen, the Israelites then go on and idolise the copper viper anyway, until eventually it has to be destroyed.

And then, just when you think its safe to go out into the clear light of the gospel, up it comes again. Right in the middle of the most famous gospel passage of all about the cross, there is the direct reference to the story of the serpent and the rod. ‘And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.’ Is this magic too?

Well, lets have a look. There are a few places to go to find out. Let’s try a Rabbi. Rabbi Arthur Waskow, from the Shalom Center, has a wonderful piece on this story and the episodes coming before it in the book of Numbers. He explains the instruction to burn red cows, with red dye, as the prescribed ritual to move people from the uncleanness of mourning – when their focus has appropriately been turned inward – back into life in community. If you stare hard into the red, red fire of the burning heifer, and then look away, you will get a blast of green – the green which speaks afresh of life or the ‘leaping greenly spirits’ as ee cummings puts it. A ritual for death which gives us a basic principle – **if we want to be healed we have to look directly at what harms us.**

Perhaps its worth reading this story in its own right in a culture today which moves increasingly to funerals without bodies – often for understandable practical reasons – but still leaves the unanswered question about how we can mourn without facing death. We live in a culture where the containing and transforming rituals have become very thin. This passage in Numbers is from a time when they were absolutely central to the culture. Numbers 20 has Moses speaking to a rock to give the thirsty people water. Not perhaps the place you’d think to go first. And then here in Numbers 21, the cure for snake bites – to look at a snake. It’s the same principle, the serpent on the rod is the ‘serpenty serpent’ - essence of serpent - yet it somehow draws the venom of the sting.

These principles help us see the connection between the world of the Hebrews and the Greek idea of *pharmakos*. Just as it is possible to get stuck in mourning and not emerge - you gaze at the red cow and never blink – a drug if used in a certain quantity can be a cure, but if too much used its a poison. It’s the principle which gives us the idea of the scapegoat. If youths are ritually offered – as to the minotaur - we will preserve ourselves from total disaster. Ritual violence saves us from total chaos. It’s on a similar basis that we can think of sacrifices made

to God. The goat, part of the ceremonies of Yom Kippur, is sent out into the wilderness to die, taking the blame for the sins of the people (memorably portrayed in Holman Hunt's picture.) We know about scapegoating alright in our culture – it happens all the time, doesn't it. It's so much easier to blame one person and export any sense of our own connectedness or responsibility for what's going on – the point Rowan Williams is making about the credit crunch and the bankers – what sort of society allowed and created this system? – or the focus on paedophiles for years before than anything more systemic can find its way into thinking about why so many of our children don't have good childhoods. Thank God for the Children's Society's report.

Damien Hirst did an installation called Pharmacy. In this and other works he explores our culture's obsession with the power of drugs as if they could defend us from our helplessness against death. And of course the BMA shares the sign of the serpent and the rod with Asclepius, the Greek god of healing as well as the Bible. In mythology he was brought up by Chiron the centaur, the original wounded healer, who having lived out of his human intellectual side as a teacher has to come to terms with his horse half after he is shot by an arrow and left with a terrible wound. That's what drives him to learn the arts of medicine from herbs from the sanctuary of his cave – which he then teaches to Asclepius. He has to come to terms with his creatureliness. This is also the role of the serpent, who in Jewish tradition is often connected with Satan as tester - the one who actually reminds us that we are creaturely through the temptation to indulge ambition, sex or greed beyond what is good for us. We came across him in this role as one of the players, along with the angels, wild beasts and agency of the spirit, in Mark's spare account of Jesus being driven into the wilderness which we had at the start of Lent. So here the serpent shows us that the way to resist temptation is not to totally repress and demonise our natural urges – they need to be *looked* at.

But we also see another kind of temptation here. Why on earth should the Israelites be complaining when God gives them bread from heaven and water from the rock? Perhaps because it's out of their control, they haven't made it for themselves, they're not in charge. Whereas *magic* presents us with the illusion of potency, instant power and autonomy, the life of faith does the reverse, reminding us of our dependency and asking us often simply to take the next step and learn to trust. It's funny how the credit crunch comes to mind so strongly as we see the movement from the 'magic' of the conjuring of imaginary/virtual money to a situation where lots of us are now forced to wrestle afresh with what it might mean to live by faith in the area of our finances in a way which connects us with the vast majority of the world's population, as well as potentially, to God. Anyway, when the Israelites look up at the serpent on the rod, they are healed from their snake bites. Is it the act of faith in looking up; is it a touch of pharmakos?

What can we tell from linking this event with the lifting up of Jesus on the cross? Firstly, it warns us of the dangers of idolising the cross. Just as the serpent on the rod got made into a thing which brought magical thinking rather than faith and which recalls to us the constant human temptation towards scapegoating, so does the cross. When this passage, when theories of the cross, are used as a bludgeon to say who is in and who is out, to condemn people and send them to outer darkness, it becomes exactly what Jesus offers to save us from.

Walking in the light

I find it very helpful to come to this passage from looking at 'I AM the light of the world' in the Lent course – which strikingly comes just after the episode with the woman caught in adultery. The episode, if you remember, where Jesus responds to all the religious pointing fingers in condemnation of her obvious sin by slowing things down and writing in the sand and saying 'Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.' Giving them time to realise that

they are not without sin, that they can't just export it all onto the woman. A beautiful example of how, if we let it, what we see as poison in our society, in our lives can become a route to healing, by allowing us to bring into the light the parts of ourselves that we keep in such darkness that they are far easier to see in others. He still tells her to sin no more.

John is absolutely clear – the raising up of the Son on the cross is not to condemn the world, 'but in order that the world might be saved through him.' If we dare to look at Jesus lifted up on the cross – yes we will see a scapegoat, and we will see something of our own part in sending him there through our sin and our own blaming of others for what we can't bear to see in ourselves. But we also see something else. Instead of a God who accepts our ritual sacrifices to ward off further violence and destruction, as we have come to expect from the behaviour of gods in the past, God gives his own son.

We might feel that the danger of bringing things into the light is that we will be condemned, exposed. No, says John, quite the reverse. '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.' The safest place is to bring things into the light – where the poison can be drawn. It's keeping them in the dark which is dangerous. That's where the microbes fester – that's where we consign ourselves to prison and poison.

The nature of judgement

Jesus does not come to judge: Yet when we refuse his offer, we leave ourselves exposed to our own snake bites, because they stand revealed in the presence and light of the holy one. The cross is like a lightning rod, in it the force, the poison, of sin is drawn and grounded, because of the action of Jesus. He goes to the place of the scapegoat, but because he is untainted by that poison, it cannot ultimately harm him. This is no magical object; nor is it a cruel sacrifice by a capricious God. The Son of Man is compared to the serpent. Do we see, with Luther, the terribleness of the crucifixion as we look right into it beholding the sin and destructiveness of ourselves and our world. Do we get stuck there or do we, as with the red cow ritual, close our eyes and open them again to see the healing and green new resurrection life offered there. Can we keep our eyes fixed on the cross, the point of contradiction, where our hungers are reconciled and satisfied.