

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 18 MARCH 2012

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

“A Snake on a Stick”

As a child I loved the story of the brazen serpent. I think it was because I found it reassuring. It told me God was in charge and that we just had to follow God’s instructions to solve any problem.

It told me God gave leaders (men) like Moses, who were there to interpret God’s messages and without asking too many questions (like I would) do silly things like sticking an image of a snake on a pole for the sake of God’s people.

I imagined one part of the minister's job in particular was to be on the receiving end of such messages and make sure they were implemented. That’s why he (it was always a he in those days) was to be revered and treated with awe and respect, no questions asked. The elders were on a par with that, although not quite as holy and close to God as I imagined the minister to be.

As much as I wondered sometimes at the holy men in our Church and their wisdom, this story told me that even if what they did looked silly at times, they had access to some higher knowledge that was not available to me. So that it was better to leave it all up to them.

That’s what I was made to believe the story told us. That if we listened to the God-given leaders among us and did exactly as they told us, all would be well. Thus the interpretation of the story was used to legitimate the status quo and underpin the power of those in leadership positions. The only thing we had to do was look up at the snake and believe.

When I moved to University something else happened. My professor of Old Testament was a confirmed believer in the historical critical method of Bible interpretation and was forever searching for the historical facts behind the myth. His focus question was: “What has really factually happened?” What historical fact is behind the story as we now have it and what layers of telling and retelling have been added later? He told us that of course most of the stories of scripture had never happened in the way it had come to us. Sure enough there would have been some historic core that had really happened, but more likely than not a lot had been added on and changed over the centuries.

This particular story, he told us, was bound to reflect a very ancient memory of an experience or even a number of experiences jumbled together that had happened to the people of Israel on their trip through the desert. Perhaps one day they had found their camp infested with snakes and people had died as a result of the fiery bite. Their leader may have used an old and proven magical method, known from, among others, ancient Egyptian sources. Putting a snake on a pole to keep the panic at bay until the snakes disappeared. It had been a scary experience and in the minds of the people this episode had survived as an example of being saved by what, at the time, must have seemed a miracle.

Or perhaps, and this was another possibility, people had been infected with parasitic worms, a sickness that is still prevalent in modern day North Africa and the Middle East. This particular parasitic worm is called fiery snake or *Dracunculus*. This worm begins in the gut, developing from

larvae in contaminated water, but the females (which can be up to 80 cm long, certainly something that could be confused with a small snake) then migrate up to just beneath the skin. A blister full of toxic material forms in the immediate vicinity of its head when it first emerges, and it may be accompanied by a severely itchy and burning rash, nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, and dizziness. These symptoms usually pass, but the blister often also breaks, leaving an opening for infection that can spread throughout the body as the worm moves along under the skin. The females carry large caches of eggs which, when they hatch, also form large, fiery blisters that eventually break and release new larvae into the world. These secondary infections are the main cause of death in those infected, though some worms can also become encapsulated in joints and other tissues, making long-term infection very disabling.

From ancient times (and in some parts of Africa still) physicians treated this infection by cutting a slit in the patient's skin, just in front of the worm's path. As the worm crawled out of the cut, the physician slowly and carefully wound the pest around a stick until the entire animal had been removed (this can take quite some time for very large worms). It is believed that because this type of infection was so common, physicians advertised their services by displaying a sign with the worm on a stick.

Some ancient memory, misinformed by an unscientific understanding of the world, had ended up as the story of the brazen snake on the pole. Simple as that.

At that point my more conservatively oriented brothers and sisters in Christ would leave the lecture room because they felt the infallible Word of God had not been done justice. This was in the seventies, and discussions about the historicity of scripture were still flaming high with passion.

Where would we end up if we analyzed scripture like that and explained away all the awe and miracle that was in there through this cold-hearted and scientific approach? Was there any place for God in this? Where would God go with his redeeming power and mercy if the snakes would have left anyway, or if the parasitic worm epidemic had somehow petered out by itself as people built up immunity to the infections or moved on to an area where this particular parasite could not live? What would happen if even professors started to allege scripture was not historically reliable? Where would it all end?

In the midst of all that Rudolf Bultmann and some of his colleagues came up with a different approach that, in a way, circumvented the issue of historicity. My professor snorted at this, what is called the existential approach. It said there may have been a historical core to the story at some stage, but that was not why the story had been preserved, and not really important anyway. The story had a deeper, archetypal meaning that would speak to our guts rather than our minds and that's why it was there.

We are all afraid of snakes you see. The fear of snakes is an archetypal fear that is hard-wired into us. And Israel knew this. The way to manage that fear and get over it, is, as anybody knows, is to face that fear. That's what the story is about said the existentialists: About snake phobia and the facing of our fears as human beings. Stories like this are there to inform us, at some profound level, about our human existence and what it entails. How we live, what drives us, and how we cope with some of the basic elements of life.

That is what the Bible is about. It is an existential story book where we can see ourselves in the mirror of ancient myth and archetypal behaviour patterns so we can make more sense of ourselves and the way we act and react in certain circumstances.

The story is just an old story, probably based on some unscientific explanation of some event in the distant past, overgrown with myth and now conveying some of the deeper wisdom humankind gathered about itself over the centuries. Those of us who read those stories with the eyes of faith will recognise God's hand in them, God's revelation of basic profound truths about us and our existence, about our life and how we can, may or should live it.

As for me, I find reading and analyzing biblical stories from the historic critical method point of view interesting and satisfying in the sense that they become a puzzle of endless fascination with new facts and possible backgrounds to be discovered along the way. An existential reading of the stories will often open up insights about the human condition and our place in them as well as some deep truths about God's role in that whole complex scheme of things called life. Over time there were other exegetical methods I learned to use, all helping me to get deeper and further with my interpretation of them.

In the end though, for any of those stories to mean anything I believe we need to go further than "just" understanding their background, their archetypal value, or figure out how they reflect human experience and give insight in human existence in general.

I believe that if these stories are to mean anything to us, we will have to see where they relate to our life and touch our being. To read them not as (hi)story, parallel or parable, but to try to discover where they connect to my story here and now and the story of those around me.

And this is where the story connected with me this week:

The Israelites grumbling in the desert at the beginning of the story reminded me of the negativity, dissatisfaction and disgruntlement that seems to dangerously infest our lives, our society and our Church at times.

Things aren't what they used to be! Ah, those were the days, when we were in Egypt and had crocodile for tea every day..... Ah, remember the seventies when the Church was full, remember when we sang the old songs, read from the old translation, when the youth group was flourishing, and the Sunday school overflowing. Remember, when we were young and tomatoes had more taste..... Those were the days.

And doesn't it make us miserable and cantankerous if we get stuck into that sort of thinking for too long? Sick with longing for a past that will never come back and unable to look towards the future because we feel there really can't ever be anything ahead of us that is as good as or even better than the past that is behind us?

In Church everything stops when we are overcome with those kinds of sentiments. Stuck in the wilderness with fiery snakes eating at our souls. Plans don't come to fruition because there is always that cloud on the horizon, the "no future - we will all be dead in twenty years time" cloud, so why bother. Nothing happens because we are so afraid of changing even the smallest thing in case our precious memories of the glorious past will somehow be changed or contaminated by different ways, shapes or colours in our buildings or our faith lives.

In our personal lives this happens when we stop trying anything new, buying anything new, investing in life. Of projecting everything that was good in the past and not expecting or even leaving room for anything new and exciting happening in the present or the future. And in that way we start to die a slow death long before it is our time.

The story also made me think about my, and most people's, tendency to turn away from hurt and pain. Most of us live with a hesitancy to face our deepest fears, a reluctance to confront what is ailing us. Privately but also collectively, it seems easier doesn't it? Fear, pain, hurt, bereavement, abuse, social inequality, economic disadvantage. Who wants to know? Most of us will turn away and hope it will go away. But it doesn't, it comes back to bite us.

So what is the cure? A bronze snake on a pole? Well, sorry Moses, but you can't be serious about that! Not in our day and age. Putting the things that harm and hurt us on display is not part of our culture!

The gospel of John identifies this snake on this pole with the Crucified Christ. Like Moses lifted the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness to save the life of his people, so Christ is lifted high on the cross by God to save us says John.

How?

Every time I come to this point in the story my mind balks. I find it very hard to accept that someone's innocent suffering on a cross would make any difference for me, let alone in any way save me. It does not make sense on a rational level and on an irrational level I resist the idea of this suffering being in some way or other "for me". Independent and self-sufficient post modern westerner that I am I don't want anybody to do anything for me, let alone die a gruesome death for me. And I don't understand how it would, or could, work anyway. Paul said it already, two thousand years ago: folly to the greeks, a stumbling block to the Jew... And for me, two thousand years later, it is both: a folly and a stumbling block.

And yet. The witness that comes to us through scripture is that this "lifting up" on the cross and what happened after, somehow has the power to convert, upturn and change life for people of faith. That is Paul's witness and that has been the witness of many after him.

But how?

Every time, over the centuries, when you see someone get closer to the truth of this mystery, what they say, how they testify makes little sense to those who are still on the outside. It only seems to make sense for those who are, to use the words of Paul, "in Christ", on the inside. Who have a living, actual, here and now experience of the living Christ touching their life and taking over.

One way for me to understand at least part of the mystery of the cross, of that "lifting up of the Crucified Christ" has been by reading it against the background of the story about the people of Israel and the fiery snakes in the desert. And because I think the writer of John probably had that story in mind as well when he wrote these words about Jesus, I think it will not be too far fetched to approach it from that direction.

Healing in the desert happens by forcing the people of Israel to confront what is eating them up, the fiery snakes that are threatening their existence. By looking at the cross we are confronted with the suffering of Christ and through him with our own suffering and the sin and suffering of the world. What is of God suffered there and was killed. The night fell. The light was extinguished. Love died. Part of God died.

And now wait two ticks before you start thinking of Easter. We're not there yet. Let's look at the snake first, look at what bites us and not look away. Look at the crucified Christ, look at the pain, the suffering, the injustice and betrayal that brought him to the cross and see our own suffering and our

own pain up there, what is done to us and what we do to each other. Needing redemption, needing God's light to shine on it and renew and transform it.

And then hear the message of Easter, see that even in the dying of Christ there already is the beginning of the transformation, the new life, the new day dawning. What early Christians discovered is that with Christ a part of God died on that cross to be raised to new life.

And that therefore we can, confidently, take on our own pain, our own suffering, our own dying, and trust that the seeds of transformation, of renewal, of love are there even while we feel the light has faded, ready to be raised to new life.

That therefore there is the certain hope, that even after we have visited the worst of what humans can do to each other or to one another, because the pain and the hurt and the death of this world will not have the last word.

Focus on the cross and you'll see that what scares you most contains, with God's help, the seed of your salvation. Amen.

Reflect this week on what would you would like to bring to the cross for transformation?

See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dracunculiasis>