

Fourth Sunday in Lent

Sermon Text – Numbers 21:4-9

Theme: *“By grace you have been saved”*

Grace, peace and mercy to you from our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

The Israelites who were led out of slavery to the Egyptians were to go into the Promised Land that God had already marked out for them. But in their journeying, they fell into the familiar pattern of calling on God for rescue, then turning away from him when they were sick and tired of his method of deliverance. The continued impatience of the people tried God’s patience and the consequences gave the Israelites every reason to consider once more who was truly leading them and the blessings that come from following God alone.

God’s solution to the Israelites’ problem points clearly to the final solution that has come to all people through the saving work of Jesus Christ. And even though we may not always like the answer God gives to our prayers, we are told to lift our eyes to Christ crucified and to trust in God’s solution as he leads us day to day.

Plagued by sin

We should remember that the setting for the Old Testament reading is the Israelites being led from Egypt into the Promised Land. The familiar pattern of calling on God to help them in their time of trouble, followed by belly-aching when they grew bored, or tired, or uncertain of what lay ahead still continued. The reading opens with the people becoming impatient with the route that was mapped out for them. Once more they ask, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.” (v5) Of course the people are grumbling about the manna which God freely gave them for as long as they journeyed through the wilderness.

It’s worth noting that the Israelites would have already been living in the Promised Land if they had followed God’s instructions. Instead we read a few chapters earlier that they became afraid and they rebelled when it was reported the inhabitants of the land God was giving them were very large and the cities were well fortified (Num 13 & 14). Their problem is that they took their eye off God’s plan and they became afraid and daunted by the work ahead of them.

So God loses patience with his people and he sent fiery serpents among the people and many of them died. This sudden appearance of fiery serpents sounds a lot like one of the plagues that God sent to the people of Egypt, but this time it is against his own people. The plagues were sent to change Pharaoh’s mind, and this time, God wants the Israelites to change from their grumbling ways and to trust in God alone.

Now serpents are synonymous with temptation and sin and through the deadly bites of the serpents, many Israelites died. If we follow the train of thought that the serpents represent the things that tempt us, what are the snakes that nip away at our vulnerable points? How are we bitten and what are the consequences for us?

Don’t we grumble and belly ache when things don’t go according to our plan? People grow bored and restless when it seems they don’t have the right partner, or the right job, or the right car, or the right (you can insert your own temptation) and so we complain to God. While soever we are focussed on the things we think we want and/or deserve... can you see the problem, we are focussed on ourselves and not on God alone and *His* plan alone for us.

And what are the consequences for our grumbling? Surely they are exactly the same as for the Israelites. Those who are bitten stand to die. Apart from the antidote or the anti-venom, we will surely die. That’s the problem for us.

God's solution – not ours

Now you might remember that the Israelites were once more in this cycle of asking God to help them; then complaining when things are tough; then turning back to God once more and so on. Now when the snakes are among them, biting and destroying life, the people turn once more to God and what do they ask of Him through Moses? Exactly what we would expect, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord and against you. Pray to the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us”. (v7) Isn't this what we would expect, and isn't it what we would ask for? The people have a dilemma and they ask God to take away what was troubling them. That sounds reasonable.

But God answered their prayers in a way the people had not expected. Instead of taking away the serpents, God told Moses to make a fiery serpent and put it on a pole so that everyone who is bitten can look at the serpent and live. Surely this is the most unusual remedy for snake bite you'll ever hear! Note that God didn't take away the problem. That would be the easy solution, but then what other 'problems' would the Israelites come up with for God to fix? Ever since the Fall, humanity has struggled under the burden of sin. What we need isn't to have our problems taken away, but to put our trust once more in God alone.

It is for this reason that God sometimes answers our prayers in the most remarkable ways. We rightly ask God to solve our problems, that's what he invites us to do. But even if one temptation, one serpent, or one problem is taken away, doesn't another pop up in its place. We don't need our problems taken away but we do need to remember that God has provided the perfect solution to the big problem that affects every man, woman and child.

Live by faith in Christ

This is the message Jesus preached to Nicodemus who was a Pharisee who was prepared to listen and hear what Jesus has to say. Jesus reminded Nicodemus that just “as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life” (Jn 3:14-15). None of God's solution to the problem of sin seems to make sense to us. Wouldn't it make much more sense to stop sinning? Wouldn't it make more sense to do something to show we were *really* sorry for our sins? Well yes, these things might make more sense for us, but they are not God's plan for us. His plan is so much more simple. Lift up your eyes to Jesus who died on the cross. Trust that Jesus died in your place.

In today's second reading St Paul very clearly describes the condition of all people. “You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world.” (Eph 2:1-2) But this is not where Paul leaves his readers but instead he describes how “God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.” (Eph 2:4-5) So God doesn't wait for you to fix yourself up. God comes to you in the middle of your sinful mess and pulls you up.

Some people struggle with this notion of Christianity. That there's nothing we can do to make us right with God. They want to put all sorts of conditions on God's love. They suggest that God starts the good work in us, but it's up to us to finish it off. That's not what God says. God's Word says, “by grace you have been saved through faith. And *this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God*, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Eph 2:8-9) This is one of the joys of seeing a little baby like Austin being baptised. There is not one thing Austin can do to be baptised, so it must be God's Holy Spirit who is calling him through his parents and grandparents and this community to be adopted by God. Austin will never be able to boast about making a decision to be baptised, but he will always be able to boast that God loved him so much, that Jesus died on the cross to save him from his sins.

And this is then your boast. That “God so loved the world, [and you,] that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (Jn 3:16) Whatever your Christian journey may have been, smooth sailing or potted holes and detours, lift up your eyes to Jesus only. Trust in God's most unusual remedy for sin and you will be blessed with the gift of eternal life which is God's free gift to you, for it is by His grace you have been saved.

And the may the peace of God which passes all understanding keep guard over your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.