



The Round Church at
St Andrew the Great
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 2nd April 2006
by Mark Ashton

10p

Numbers chapter 21:4-9; John 3:14-18

That'll never work...will it?

Introduction

I wonder if your heart sank as you heard that first reading from an obscure part of the Old Testament? Did you think to yourself, “Why do Christians have such an obsession with ancient religious texts, as if those texts could have any relevance to 21st century Cambridge? Am I about to be bored to death by some improbable explanation for a bit of old folk religion that cannot have any bearing on my life today?” Well, as we start tonight, we need to face those questions, because Christians do believe that the Bible is all about one subject: it is all about Jesus Christ. He is the subject of the whole Bible, Old Testament and New. And here in Numbers 21 we actually have one of the Old Testament’s clearest pictures of what Jesus has done for you and me. Jesus said so Himself—*Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life* (John 3:14-15).

1) The People (vv 4-7)

They travelled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!” (Numbers 21:4-5). These were the people of Israel who had been rescued by God from slavery in Egypt in order to occupy the promised land of Canaan. But on the way there they kept rejecting God’s plan for them (“*Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert?*”), and despising God’s provision for them (“*There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!*”

[the manna]); just as you and I conclude there cannot be a God, because He does not answer our prayers by giving us what we want. “How can there be a God”, we think, “when life is so difficult for me, and God does not intervene to make it easier for me, however much I ask Him to?” We forget that, if there is a God, then maybe His will is a lot more important than my will. Perhaps what He wants for me is more important than what I want for myself.

Well, God acted swiftly to stop the Israelites making that mistake: *Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died* (v 6). And the people recognised God’s judgement on their sin: *The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you* (v 7a). We know that the selfishness, which is only interested in my own comfort and welfare, brings its own reward of individual unhappiness, and social disintegration. And more than that, it cuts us off from God Who is perfect goodness, perfect unselfishness. And that is what death represents in the Bible: separation from God.

So those snakes are a picture of the consequences of your and my selfishness: *Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died* (v 6). And notice the people respond appropriately (which is quite a surprise considering how badly they usually responded to this sort of situation), by acknowledging their fault and asking God to deal with their situation: *The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed for the people* (v 7).

Now, there is no point in going any further with this story without first asking ourselves whether we too have reached that point? Have I recognised that I have a problem with selfishness? That I naturally put myself at the centre of my own life? And that is what gives me a problem with God—because He, by definition, has to be at the centre? When I push God out, and centre my life on myself (even though I manage to appear outwardly charming and pleasant to other people), I enter a state of death (spiritual death) as far as God is concerned. He means nothing to me and I mean nothing to Him. Do you recognise that situation? Would you acknowledge it of yourself? Then we can usefully consider what God does about it—

2) The Snake (v 8)

The LORD said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live” (v 8). God provided a most unexpected solution. Earlier in the Bible, the people of Israel had been forbidden from making an image of any living thing, lest it become an idol (Exodus 20:4). Moreover, the snake was regarded as a ceremonially unclean animal according to the religious law in Leviticus (Leviticus 11:41-45); and, since the temptation in the Garden of Eden, the snake had an association with evil. Snakes, along with spiders, are almost universally regarded with dislike and revulsion. Most of us find them repellent.

But, against all these taboos: *The LORD said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live”* (v 8). God took the symbol of what was killing them and made it the only source of life and deliverance for them. The image of death became the hope of life. They had to look at the consequence of their own disobedience in order to be saved from the consequence of that disobedience.

This is an extraordinary pre-figuring of Jesus Christ’s death on the cross, where (the New Testament tells us) *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us* (2 Corinthians 5:21). God hates sin. It is as hateful to Him as a snake is to the most snake-phobic person present this evening. And He made His most dearly beloved son, Jesus, to be sin, to be what He hates most—to be identified with our evil, to die for it in our place.

The cross has become a noble symbol for us. In the ancient world, it was regarded with universal

hatred, dread, revulsion and contempt. The cross is shocking. What God did there is shocking, as, in the Person of His Son, He identified Himself with your and my sin and took its consequences upon Himself, so that you and I do not have to take the consequences upon ourselves—of death, eternal separation from God.

But the manufacture of the bronze snake did not by itself save the people by driving away the snakes, or making their venom harmless, or making the people immune to it. They had to respond: *The LORD said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.” So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived* (vv 8-9).

3) The Look (v 9)

The idea that a person could survive a deadly snakebite simply by looking at a metal sculpture of a snake, held high on a pole, was highly improbable. But the very strangeness of the idea is what makes it such a powerful illustration of the cross: *“anyone who is bitten can look at it and live”* (v 8b). That look represented no effort or achievement on the part of each Israelite. It just represented an acknowledgement that they were dying and that God had promised a cure: *So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived* (v 9). They just had to trust God. So do we: *“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life”* (John 3:14-16). That is what belief is: it is to trust what God has done. It is to say, “I’m dying, and only God can save me”. Oh, but we find that hard don’t we? We so want to solve our problems, to save ourselves from our sin.

Let’s take an imaginary trip into the Israelite camp. Let’s imagine we encounter one or two of the people. Here’s someone—Tim—doesn’t he look ill?

1) Tim Taylor, looking decidedly ill, crossing platform—

Mark: “Excuse me, but isn’t that a snake-bite on your ankle?”

Tim: “Oh no, it’s probably just a graze; I think I knocked it on a tent peg”.

Mark: “But you are going blue!”

Tim: “Oh no, I’m always this colour, you know”

Mark: “But you’re dying!”

Tim: “Oh, don’t get dramatic! It’s just the way I am...always like this...I’m.f i n e..”

He’s dying, but indifferent, pretending there’s nothing wrong. Just as some people shut their eyes tight, and then announce to everyone else that there can be no God, because they cannot see Him...when so much within them, and without, is crying out that there must be a God. And their sin goes undealt with, and God remains unknown to them. Don’t let that be you. Wait, here’s Caroline.

2) Caroline Herbert, rummaging in a medicine chest—

Mark: “Have you been bitten?”

Caroline: “Yes, and I’ve got just the thing for it somewhere here. It’s the perfect cure for snakebite.”

Mark: “But haven’t you heard? God has provided a bronze snake on a pole; you just have to look at it and live”.

Caroline: “Oh, I’m sure that’s alright for some, but I’ve got my own cure in here. It’s called going to church. It will be just the answer—would you like to try some?” (offering medicine bottle)

But there are no human answers to the problem of our sin, not in religious practices, not in trying to be good. There is only one cure—to look and to live. Hello, here’s Ian. What’s he up to?

3) Ian Somasundram, with a stick killing snakes around him—

Ian: “I’ve got ten of the blighters already—come and help me!” (hitting and stamping furiously) “Ow!” as if bitten.

Mark: “But, you only have to look at the snake on the pole and you will be cured. Just look and live!”

Ian: “No, no, we’ve got to kill the wretched things. Help me do it. You just have to whack ‘em behind the head, and that does the trick! Give me a hand—we’ll fix ‘em.”

But it won’t. He’s trying to put the world to rights, but the problem lies in his own heart. He needs to fix that first. But what about Katherine?

4) Katherine Monument, in complete despair, crying—

Mark: “Have you been bitten?”

Katherine: “Yes. I can feel the poison going through my body. Already I can hardly move.”

Mark: “You don’t have to move; all you have to do is to look at the snake on the pole”.

Katherine: “No, you don’t understand—I’ve got the venom in my bloodstream. I’m dying. There’s nothing that can be done to help me. I’m doomed”

Mark: “But there is—you only have to look!”

Katherine: “Even if I did, the snakes are everywhere—I’d only get bitten again. There’s no hope.”

But there is, if only she would believe God, look and live. Now what about Peter?

5) Peter Herbert, looking happy—

Mark: “Haven’t you been bitten?”

Peter: “Yes”.

Mark: “So are you dying?”

Peter: “No”

Mark: “Why not?”

Peter: “Because I’ve looked. I have trusted God’s answer, and He has saved my life.”

Mark: “But how do you know?”

Peter: “Because God has said so.”

There, you see, is the secret—Peter is not actually trusting the snake. He is trusting God’s word about the snake. He’s not looking to himself—he is looking to God and what God has said. Will you do that?

I am asking you tonight to trust what God has said about the cross: *“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life”* (John 3:14-16). It is that simple. There is no one here tonight who is not yet a Christian because there is something you still have to do for God. If you are not a Christian yet, it is because you won’t let God do something for you. That’s how it starts, by trusting Him.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)