

John 3:14-21

In the season of Lent we are called to prepare for Easter by examining our lives, invited to ask what it means to be ourselves, invited to rediscover who we are and who God calls us to be. How will we know that we have had a successful Lent?

Will it be a successful Lent if we fulfill our plan to pray and read the Bible every day? Will Lent be successful by keeping track of what we gave up, the sacrifices that we made? The Scriptures tell us that our Lent will be successful when we deepen our relationship with God. This is the theme of all the Scripture lessons today.

The Book of Numbers recalls the years that the Hebrews wandered in the wilderness following their Exodus from slavery in Egypt. This was not a glorious journey to the promised land, but a time of great discontent, characterized by complaints about lack of food and water, conflict over the leadership of Moses and Aaron, and rebellion against Yahweh.

The people had lost sight of their original vision of freedom, and felt they had been led into the desert to die. When poisonous serpents appeared, people were bitten and many died. The Hebrews believed the serpents were punishment for their infidelity and unwillingness to endure the hardships of their journey. They begged Moses to pray and ask the Lord to make the serpents go away.

God answered the prayer of Moses by commanding him to fashion a poisonous serpent and set it upon a pole as protection against the deadly poison of the snakes. Those who were bitten were to look up at the bronze serpent and live. So the serpent became a symbol of God's mercy and healing power. Today, intertwined serpents are a symbol of medical healing.

Our reading from the Gospel of John is a reminder that God isn't aloof and above human pain and suffering. Jesus, in his conversation with Nicodemus, compares the lifting up of the serpent in the wilderness to his own lifting up. Both are God's response to human sin and both require a faith response. As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, "so must the Son of Man be lifted up" on the Cross. Each "lifting up" is a sign of God's compassion and mercy. Whoever looks to the Cross and believes will share in the life of God's reign in the age to come.

Jesus goes on to say that, "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that world might be saved through him." Jesus came to save, not to condemn, to bring light, not darkness. Those who believe in the light will live in the light. This is a choice freely offered, and the choice one makes is demonstrated by one's deeds.

The judgment to come is not judgement as punishment, but the crisis that befalls those who will not come out of the darkness for fear of the light. It's not judgement as punishment, but judgment as tragic loss, living in darkness when one could be living in the light. God comes to us in compassionate, sacrificial love to redeem such loss, to turn tragedy into victory,

God's boundless love is powerfully expressed in the familiar words of vs.16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

Like the Israelites in the desert, we also turn our eyes, not to the symbolic serpent on the pole, but to Jesus on the Cross. When we look in his direction, indeed, when we summon up the courage to look into his eyes, see and accept the light of God's love for us, we experience healing from the wounds of life. We begin to realize just how much God loves us. In the light of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, we see God's answer to sin is the offer of new life, resurrection life.

During this season of Lent, we are called to recognize and acknowledge our need of repentance and forgiveness as we stare in awe of the sheer abundance of God's love for us in the gift of his beloved Son, Jesus Christ. In Lent, God calls each of us to reflect upon our journey, to allow God to forgive and cleanse us of those wounds, those hurts, those resentments, those barriers that prevent us from becoming all that God desires us to be.

In Christ we are made new, children of the light, acceptable to God because Jesus gave his life for us, that we might have new life in him. That's why we pray in our Lord's Prayer, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven." Amen.

Resources: Synthesis, 2009,2015; First Impressions: Jude Siciliano, 2012; Herbert O'Driscoll, 1987; David Lose, 2018; Rt. Rev. Gordon Scruton, 2005.