

Sermon. 22nd March.

We bring you greetings from the Bristol District, Ward Jones, Chair of the district and from Jonathan Pye Principal of Wesley College.

Well, the young people will be eating their way through the jelly snakes to remind them of the Bronze snake lifted high on the pole by Moses, and I would like us to return to that story for a while, as it needs a little more explanation than I was able to give earlier in the young people's story. The first thing we need to know is that snakes in the ancient world stood for a variety of things. They were symbols of death and danger, but also fertility, life and healing. Secondly, we need to remember that in Old Testament times, people believed that God was the direct cause of everything that happened. Everything was sent by God and that included, diseases, plagues and disasters and they were seen as a punishment. You will find some people who still believe today that God sends horrible things into the world in order to punish his people for the way they are living their lives. I want to tell you pretty quickly that this does not fit in with my belief in a loving God and I will come back to this point again later. In the Old Testament story 3 significant things happened in order for the Israelites to be saved from the snakes.

Firstly, they had to realise that they needed to trust God again. The story of the Israelites looks a bit like a roller coaster, they trust God for a little while when things are going well then they turn against him, then they trust again and so it goes on. So they were at a time when they needed to say they were sorry and turn around, in other words repent. That is what the word repent means, to turn around, or change direction. If you had lived in the time of the Roman occupation you would have been familiar with the word repent, as you would have heard it shouted out as a command to soldiers when they were marching, repent, change direction. That was the first thing the Israelites needed to do.

Secondly, Moses had to be obedient to God and do what God told him to do. The Israelites expected Moses to pray and the snakes would disappear, instead of which, Moses was told to make an effigy of a snake. Can you imagine how the Israelites reacted to him when he did this? It reminds me of the story of Noah when he was building the ark, (essentially a ship), in the middle of a desert, it seemed to the people like a ridiculous thing to do and they made fun of him. It is tough being a leader, especially when God is calling you to one thing that looks like madness to everyone else. Despite all of this, Moses was obedient.

Thirdly, when the people had been bitten, in order for them to be healed they had to respond with an action. They had to look at the snake to show their faith in its healing powers. So three actions were required, Repentance, Obedience and Response.

Now we turn our attention to the gospel reading. This is such a familiar passage, most people quote John 3 verse 16 but then ignore verse 17 which states, 'Jesus came into the world **not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.**' This does not speak to me of a God who sends punishment into the world by way of diseases like HIV Aids to teach his children lessons, does it you? Rather it is as a consequence about the way we have chosen to live our lives and the greed which often accompanies this.

In verse 14 we see the gospel writer comparing the lifting up of the snake in the desert to Jesus being lifted up on the cross. I think there are more comparisons to be found. As we approach Easter we are reminded that Jesus turned around and set his face towards Jerusalem. Jesus didn't need to repent of his sins, but he did need to turn towards the direction of the cross. He prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible take this cup from me, (Matt 26.39), This shows that it was not the way he wished to go if another way could be found. The verse ends with the words, 'yet not as I will, but as you will.' Jesus was obedient to his Father's will and his

response was to walk the way of the Via Dolorosa, the way of the cross. He showed his trust in his Father and how much he loved us by his actions, his response.

Our final comparison between the Old Testament story and our gospel reading is this. When the Israelites looked at the snake they were healed by faith, but it was only temporary relief, an extension of their life, but they still died. When anyone looks to Jesus they are also healed (made whole) by faith, but he gives eternal relief as the unending source of life. The blood of the Lamb was shed as a once and for all sacrifice so that we might be saved through him.

The same invitation that was given to the Israelites to repent, be obedient and to respond is given to each one of us here today. When we accept the invitation it doesn't mean that all the bad things in our life will disappear, we are the people we are because of our experiences. Rev. Leslie Weatherhead noted that it was through the darkest times in his life that he learnt the most and became closer to God. Repenting is the first step, recognising our need to turn around, away from the things that distract us or form barriers between us and God. Being obedient takes great courage, especially when you believe God is asking you to do something that looks like madness to the people around you or the outside world. It is not only leaders who are called to obedience. The Christian faith is counter cultural, we are called to forgive our enemies, to share what we have with others, not to build up riches for ourselves, and this appears to others as weak. It can lead to others making fun of us when we respond in this way. It is in our response that we are witnesses and the way others come to know about the invitation from a loving and merciful God who will not abandon us. He has shown his faithfulness to us by sending his son. Our message is one of hope and I want to finish this morning by showing you a picture that reminds me of the hope I have in Christ. It is a picture of the cross in the garden at Burrswood home of healing in Kent. The reason I have it is because you can see through the cross to the sky beyond. Without the cross there can be no resurrection, and this picture reminds me that even in the bad times there is hope through the cross of Jesus. The way is often hard, but we live as Christians knowing that nothing can separate us from the love of God unless we allow it to. We can get distracted, sidelined, tired and frustrated, but we must keep our focus on the cross and beyond. We can give up on God, but God never gives up on us! As we listen to the piece of meditative music I invite you to reflect on the 3 stages we have spoken about today. Repentance, Obedience and Response. What is God asking of you today? Have things got in the way causing barriers in your relationship with him? Do you need to turn back to him?

Is he asking you to be obedient by accepting a task that you do not feel able to do and so you are putting off responding to him? I want to leave you with a saying that I have to hold on to everyday in my discipleship journey, in the hope that it will give you courage.

God does not call the equipped, he equips those he calls.

Amen.