

Snakes in the desert

Snakes don't get good review in the bible – things really don't get off to a good start with the story of the temptation in the garden of Eden in Genesis.

People are scared of snakes. Generally, far more scared than the actual danger that snakes represent. In fact, the fear of snakes is the second most prevalent animal phobia. (Second after spiders).

And of course, we've had this story from the book of Numbers today. It takes place in the wilderness – after Moses had led the people out of Egypt toward the promised land. By the time of this incident, the people had been wandering in the desert for almost forty years.

Almost forty years - most of those who had come out of Egypt with Moses were dead. Their children - if not their grandchildren - would be the ones to enter the promised land. And still, between Moses and the people of Israel, and their destination - the promised land of Canaan - were the Edomites. You might remember the Edomites: They were the descendants of Esau, whereas the Israelites were the descendants of Jacob. And you might remember, too, that Esau and Jacob didn't part on friendly terms.

So as they approached Edomite territory, Moses sent messengers to the king of Edom saying "Please let us pass through your country. We will not go through any field or vineyard, or drink water from any well. We will travel along the King's Highway and not turn to the right or to the left until we have passed through your territory." (Numbers 20:17).

But Edomites weren't going to co-operate, and they answered: "You may not pass through here; if you try, we will march out and attack you with the sword." (20:18)

So Moses asked a second time, and said "We will go along the main road, and if we or our livestock drink any of your water, we will pay for it. We only want to pass through on foot—nothing else." (20:19)

But again, they were refused, and a large, heavily armed Edomite force came out to reinforce the message.

And so, because of the Edomite's response, the people of Israel were forced to take a long detour. This detour meant a few hundred extra kilometres for the people of Israel. It wasn't simply a matter of taking a longer road - there was no other road. The whole nation was forced to travel through desert – through the sand, across the rocky outcrops, with little or no vegetation with which to feed their livestock, and scarcely any water. It was the whole community, too, the old, the young, with all their flocks and herds, and they were carrying everything they owned.

But they were nearly there. Nearly to the promised land. And now they had this extra journey imposed. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that as we get to the start of this morning's reading that "the people grew impatient on the way." (21:4) and that the people "spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up

out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!”.

The miserable food they were complaining about was the manna God sent down every day from heaven.

They should have known better than to complain. After all, the people had witnessed the might and power of God to save them time after time.

- God had parted the Red Sea so they could pass through safely
- when they were hungry, God had sent them quail, he'd sent them manna
- when they were thirsty, God had provided them water from the rock
- And just at the beginning of this chapter, God had saved them from the Canaanite king of Arad, and given them victory over the Canaanites at Hormah.

But in spite of all of that, the people complained. And I do find myself wondering if I would complain. Or, in fact, if I do complain. Do I think, sometimes, that God should be looking after me better than he is? Do we, as a church, think that God should be doing better for us?

In spite of all that God had done for them, the nation had turned its back on God and on God's servant Moses. The people conveniently forgot all that God had done for them and began to complain.

And then the snakes come on the scene.

Verse 6 tells us that the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. (21:6)

Now, I don't think, if we complain today, that God is going to send venomous snakes to bite us, or fire and brimstone, or even natural disasters. BUT if we choose to live our lives in ways that God doesn't want us to live, if we turn away from God, then there will be consequences.

You might remember after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, that it was suggested that they had happened because God had ceased protecting America, because America had turned their collective backs on God.

But the gospel assures us that God doesn't turn his back on us. Even when we had turned away from God, God sent Jesus into the fallen world to save it. To save us.

However, it is reasonably suggested that the 9/11 attacks may well have been the consequence of decades of American foreign policy and American culture and all sorts of other factors.

As we see throughout history, a lot of the time people don't realise they're doing the wrong thing, unless there's a consequence or indeed a punishment.

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. (21:7)

Moses prayed for the people. He acted as an intercessor. Moses interceded for Israel before God and asked God to save them.

For us, of course, it is Jesus who intercedes. In Moses we see an indication – a foretaste – of what Jesus will do. When we sin, it is Jesus who pleads for us before his Father's throne. We read in the letter to the Hebrews that “he is able for all time to save those who approach God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.” (Hebrews 7:25)

And God heard and answered the prayer of Moses,

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.”⁹ 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, they lived. (21:8-9)

What a strange thing that is. The solution to the problem of the snakes isn't getting rid of the snakes, and nor is it providing some sort of anti-venom. Bizarrely, they just have to look at this bronze snake, and they will live.

We need to understand that it wasn't the statue of the snake that saved the people; the bronze snake itself wasn't magical or supernatural. The solution was supernatural, but it was the power of God.

It's a hard thing for us to get our minds around, and it was hard for the Israelites too. We read in the book of 2 Kings (2 Kings 18:4) that King Hezekiah ended up breaking the bronze serpent into pieces, because the people of Israel had been making offerings to it: They'd been worshipping it. That symbol of God's saving power had become an idol to them.

But if it didn't have any power, why was it needed? The bronze snake on a pole was just a symbol of salvation. It was God who saved the people, but the people needed to respond to God in order to be saved.

And it was a strange symbol. It was snakes that were killing the people. It was Satan disguised as a snake that led mankind into rebellion against God. And, throughout Scripture snakes are something bad (Lev 11:41-42). Snakes are scary. Yet, God used a bronze snake on a pole as a symbol of salvation that he gave to his people.

Last week in church we celebrated Holy Communion, one of the two sacraments that we have. In the liturgy I referred to it as symbolic. But in the history of the church there have been many who treat the sacraments as having saving powers - they have thought that the simple act of eating and drinking is able to save or that the act of Baptism is able to save. But the sacraments don't save, they don't have any power of their own: Like the bronze snake, they are symbols of God's grace to us, and we are saved only by God's grace in Jesus and through faith in Jesus.

Jesus, as we heard in the reading from John's gospel today, makes the connection from the bronze snake to himself. Talking to Nicodemus, Jesus said:

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. (John 3:14-15)

The snake was lifted up on a pole. In the same way Jesus was later lifted up on the cross.

And just like the Israelites had to turn their eyes to the bronze snake in belief in order to be saved, we must turn to Jesus, to look with faith at the Son of Man lifted up (on the cross), if we are to be saved from sin and death.

We have to realise that people today are like the Israelites were back then. They've rebelled against God and are destined to die as surely as if they'd be bitten by a venomous snake. And, just as Israel was totally helpless to do anything about it themselves, so are people today: They can't save themselves. Only the Son of Man, Jesus, lifted up upon the cross is able to save them. Only when we look with faith to Jesus are we saved. Only when we put our faith, our hope, and our future in him.

And that is God's gift to each one of us, and to all of us.

It is a gift that cost God his only Son.

But it is offered to all, and given freely.

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man was lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

All we need do is look to him in faith.

Amen.