

Lent 4 B 2021

Readings: Numbers 21.4-9; Ephesians 2.1-10; John 3.14-21

“The Son of Man must be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

We have arrived at the mid-point of Lent. In the ancient of the days, on Good Friday, a veiled cross was brought into the sanctuary. The veil was ceremonially removed to reveal an image of Christ hanging in agony, gazing down upon us all. The crucifix was then lifted up three times, each time the priest intoning “Behold the wood of the cross on which hung the Saviour of the world”, those watching will respond “O come let us worship”.

“Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” the Spiritual asks. The rituals of Good Friday allow us to make the heartfelt response: “Yes, yes I was.”

Why do we venerate the cross on Good Friday? So that all who gaze may know deep in their hearts that “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” It is the most evangelical moment in our liturgical year.

The words the “lifting up of the Son of Man” that Christians re-enact in the Good Friday ritual are unique to the gospel of John. They are repeated later in the gospel when Jesus says: “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself”. The immediate context of today’s gospel is the visit of that curious member of the ruling religious elite of Jerusalem called Nicodemus who comes to Jesus under cover of darkness with many questions. In their conversation, Jesus compares this “lifting up of the Son of Man”, which he is to undergo, to an incident from the story of the ancient Hebrews being led by Moses through the wilderness to the Promised Land. After rebelling against God and Moses his chosen one, the people are plagued by poisonous snakes. Moses is commanded by God to save them in the quasi-magical gesture of mounting the bronze image of a snake on a pole. When those who have been poisoned look up at the bronze serpent they are healed. It is a strange moment from the distant religious past and is easily dismissed or misunderstood.

The juxtaposition of the lifting up of the bronze serpent with the lifting up of Jesus on the cross is not, of course, meant to equate the serpent with Jesus, but rather the saving effect of the “lifting up” of each of them (Fuller). It is the saving act of God in both cases, the lifting up, drawing the gaze of all, the attention of all, to an inexpressible, incomprehensible Love.

It is in the drawing of the human gaze upwards to meet the loving gaze of God in his passion that healing comes. For God so loved the world.

When we venerate the cross on Good Friday, it is as if the very sight of Christ lifted up on the cross has the power to bring us, as it did the centurion on the first Good

Friday, to conversion. For each of us, no matter how strong or weak our faith, is called to become a Christian once again every Lent. (Ratzinger).

There is a real sense in which this Good Friday moment is re-enacted in every Eucharist when the priest lifts up the Host and the Chalice during the Eucharistic Prayer over the bread and wine. As 21st c Anglicans, and yet, is it not true that Corona-tide, Covid time, has made us medieval Christians once again, almost never receiving communion by mouth, depending entirely on our eyes, gazing upon the Eucharistic Lord on our screens, and in the case of those who have no screen to look at or who cannot see for whatever reason, depending entirely on that organ of deepest in-sight, the human heart?

Most of us would agree that the medieval experience of the Eucharist was in some sense deformed, but now that we are in their place, in a sense, is there not something to be learned?

Even though the gospels never describe the face of Jesus - his features, the colour of his hair and eyes - they often speak of his gaze. His blessed Mother and John the beloved disciple at the foot of the cross, Peter on the lakeshore, Mary Magdalene in the garden, the rich young man who so wants to be a disciple, the crowds who followed and listened to him, all knew his face intimately, you can sense it as you read the accounts of his encounters with them. Hebrew scripture, especially the psalms speak repeatedly of "seeking the face of the Lord," and "beholding the fair beauty of the Lord." These scriptures all take on new resonance in our current situation.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.... having looked at Jesus lifted up, and having bathed in the love of his shared gaze, these words come to us in the midst of the season of Lent as a renewed call to convert, to turn, to recommit ourselves to that Love which is "ever ancient, ever new."

The 4th Sunday of Lent is a kind of oasis in the wilderness of the season, coming at its midpoint. It was historically a time to ease the rigours of penitential disciplines (when they were kept rigorously), to take a deep breath in a sense, before stepping back into the last weeks of Lent. Whatever our Lenten disciplines may or may not be, whatever wildernesses we are passing through in our lives this Lent of 2021, can we do so strengthen by today's gospel words: God so loved that he gave...? Can we take into ourselves once more the deep truth that the gospel is not about how hard we try, how hard we struggle, how much or how little we believe or sometimes don't? It is about "God so loved that he gave" ...himself.

The readings this Sunday reminds us of something very simple, which unexpectedly requires the most difficult thing of us: that we shed our reliance on our own effort, that we let go of the belief that we need to be better, more moral, more spiritual, more intelligent, more beautiful, more content in order to be friends with God and with ourselves. It is not that we shouldn't want to be better, it's not to say that we shouldn't try. It is not to say that we shouldn't repent and amend our ways. It is to say that when we come up against the wall and realize that we are not going to be able to do this, God meets us with that gaze from the cross, from the Eucharist, and the moment of our failure becomes the moment of our conversion – we see where

our true hope lies, that God comes not to condemn, but to save. Like the 17thc priest and poet, George Herbert who wrote in Love bade me welcome: "I cannot look on thee", we may feel that we are too guilty of dust and sin, too slack, unkind, ungrateful. But the Lord keeps his gaze upon us, even when we avert ours, searching us out. Love is always bidding us welcome, even as our souls drawback.

And what of the success stories among us, what of those whose efforts are bearing fruit, who feel that they are not doing too badly in the acquisition of virtue, of becoming better people? His gaze still meets them, too, not to condemn their hubris if that is what it is, but so that they, too, can see in the beauty of the divine love lifted up on the cross that as good as all this is, there is so much more than our virtues, our successes, even our goodness. There is this embrace of the One who made us, calls, and draws us to himself.

There is so much to watch, to look at, to fix our gazes upon - now more so than ever before in the history of humankind. Much of what we look at is deadening. Our faith is that whatever the object of our gaze may be at any given moment, we are always the object of Christ's, looking upon us not in condemnation but in love, "for God so loved the world."

Amen.