

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Lent

14th March 2021

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The Reverend Andrew Sempell is Rector of St James' Church, King Street, Sydney. He is also Chair of the Anglican Board of Mission and a Fellow of St Paul's College, University of Sydney. He is married to Rosemary, who is Archivist at the NSW Parliament, and they have an adult daughter Kate.

Fr Andrew was ordained priest in 1989 and served four years at Grafton Cathedral. In 1993 he joined the Australian Army as a Chaplain and served nine years in numerous locations, including peace-keeping operations in Bougainville. He became Dean of Bathurst in 2002 and Rector of St James in 2010.

Sydney is Australia's largest city, with a population of around 5.5 million people. St James' Church is located in its CBD and has many notable public institutions within its boundaries, including Government House, Parliament House, the Supreme Court, the Reserve Bank, and the Sydney Opera House.

Readings: Numbers 21: 4-9; & John 3: 14-21.

“From Death to Life”

Stop the Snakes!

Australia is well known for its dangerous animals; including our crocodiles, sharks, venomous spiders and, of course, snakes. Indeed, a large number of the world's most venomous snakes are Australian residents. We also take a perverse interest in demonstrating how these creatures invade our human space. I've seen photos of snakes in showers and lunch boxes, devouring cats and possums, and even fighting with crocodiles!

As a child, growing up on a farm, I was taught to have a healthy respect for snakes. “Don't try and touch them, don't kill them, don't run away, just give them a wide berth” my father would say; and it stuck. Today, I am much more aware of the ecological importance of snakes in our environment. I also know that they are mostly timid creatures that prefer to avoid humans, and that in Australia few people are either attacked by them or die from their bite.

The Bible tends to give snakes a lot of bad press. It begins with the creation stories where the 'serpent' is described as cunning and deceitful, and who dupes Eve into eating of the forbidden fruit and subsequently encouraging Adam to do likewise. Of course, by eating of this fruit Adam and Eve gained 'knowledge of good and evil'. In other words, they gained consciousness of freedom of choice.

Nevertheless, the narrative goes on to describe the consequences of this act, which resulted in Adam and Eve being cast out of the garden of Eden. They were cursed to have to work hard, know pain, and ultimately die. For the snake, punishment was having to crawl on the ground and be at enmity with humans. In this way, the snake came to be understood as the ‘bad guy’, but it was not so everywhere.

In the Ancient Near East, the serpent also had certain mythological qualities with respect to matters of fertility, healing, and magic. There are examples of statues, jewellery and charms depicting snakes for a variety of religious purposes, usually with positive connotations. Interestingly, the image of a snake on a pole remains with us today in the symbol for medical care, or the *Rod of Asclepius*, which was an ancient Greek symbol for healing.

In today’s reading from Numbers, the narrative presents the Hebrew people wandering in the wilderness on their journey from Egyptian slavery to freedom in the promised land of Canaan. The people are clearly not happy and are contemplating rebellion because they feared that they would die from lack of food and water. ‘Whinge, whinge, whinge’ they went; and could it get worse? It most certainly could; as they were infested with snakes, some of which bit people and caused them to die.

Predictably, the people cried out to God “Turn back the snakes!” But God did not turn back the snakes, and instead provided a cure. The people had to learn to live with the snakes as part of God’s creation and on whose ground they trod. Instead, they could find healing by looking at a bronze snake on a pole that Moses had made. The people themselves had to act and become part of the solution.

This story affirms a God who is interested in humanity, but who does not take away the challenges of life. Just as I had to learn to live with snakes as a child, so too did the Hebrews in the wilderness. Nevertheless, there is some ambiguity surrounding the image of the snake, for the serpent could be cunning and deceiving and a cause of death, yet it could also be a symbol of healing.

Judaism never fully relegated the snake to the nether world of Satan. Indeed, it wasn’t until the development of Medieval Christianity that the snake became a symbol of the devil. It came to be seen in depictions of the Blessed Virgin Mary standing on a snake – being presented as the ‘new Eve’ who reversed the effect of the snake’s original deception in Genesis.

A New Healing

Jesus used the symbol of Moses’ snake on the pole in his dialogue with the Jewish leader Nicodemus. He said that the Son of Man will also be ‘lifted up’ on a pole so that people may be able to look to him and receive spiritual healing and eternal life. In this way, Jesus identified with the symbol of the bronze snake – a symbol of healing.

Just as it was for those in the wilderness who had to look at the bronze statue, so too we must respond and act by looking to Jesus, who will bring peace, healing, and enlightenment. It segues into an interesting parallel with the eating of the fruit of the tree of the ‘knowledge of good and evil’, which led to understanding, wisdom and discernment.

Knowledge can be both a freeing and binding concept, depending upon how you approach it. As the Gospel reading states:

“...the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.” (John 3: 19b-21)

The important matter here is to want to be enlightened, thereby taking on the risk of knowing good and evil, and subsequently choosing to do the good. It is a choice, it is risky, but it can also bring spiritual blessing.

Entering the Kingdom

In our own journey to the promised land of God’s Kingdom, we are constantly presented with pressing questions, from mundane choices about things such as what we should eat, to profound ethical ones between good and evil.

Some of the more important spiritual ones are those asked at Baptism:

- Do you turn to Christ?
- Do you repent of your sins?
- Do you reject selfish living and all that is false and unjust?
- Do you renounce Satan and all evil?

On Easter Day we will have the opportunity to renew our baptismal promises by responding to these questions for ourselves. We also have an opportunity to prepare for this through Lent, by asking ourselves how we are going on the journey of faith. Are we in the wilderness encountering snakes? And do we look to Jesus on the cross for healing?

An old story goes:

“When I was young I wanted to save the world, so I prayed ‘God please intervene to stop the wars, feed the hungry, house the homeless, and heal the sick’; but I did nothing, and nothing seemed to change.

When I was middle-aged I realised it wasn't working, so I prayed 'God give me the strength to change those close to me', but nothing seemed to change.

Now that I am old I pray 'God give me the strength to change myself' and at least I have changed. If only I had prayed this earlier!"

The fact is that when we change the world changes, and it is God who helps us to do this. What we need to do is turn to Jesus and put our faith in his message of love. In this way God's Spirit can enter our hearts to bring about healing and change.

The snakes will still be there on the journey, and perhaps we may be able to avoid them by keeping out of their way, but if we are bitten we will be able to find a cure by looking to Jesus who removes the poison of sin and failure and restores us with healing and new life.