

Followers of the Way

Yeshua Malik (Jesus is king) – Calling sin by its name

Preacher: Philip Quenby, 1-5-22

Numbers 21:4-9 and John 3:10-15

Several times, Jesus specifically affirms Old Testament Scriptures we might prefer to avoid or explain away – or even pretend they're not in the Bible at all. He does it with the story of Noah building an Ark to save himself and his close family from the impending Flood (Matthew 24:37-39). He does it with Jonah being swallowed by a whale (Matthew 12:39-41). He does it with the creation of the first man and woman (Matthew 19:4-6). And, in the passage we just heard from John's gospel, he does it with an event that seems on its face to be out-and-out bizarre – a bronze serpent being lifted up on a pole so people can look at it and therefore be saved from a plague of poisonous snakes. What on earth is going on and why does Jesus think the pharisee Nicodemus, "a member of the Jewish ruling council [the Sanhedrin]" (John 3:1) who's already been totally nonplussed in this same conversation by Jesus' talk of being "born again" (John 3:3 and 3:7), needs to hear this? What possible relevance can it have for us today?

Old Testament background

Let's start by setting the scene for the Old Testament episode Jesus is talking about. Through a series of miracles, God has delivered the Israelites from captivity in Egypt. Under the leadership of Moses, they've received the Ten Commandments and other laws on Sinai, they've dedicated the Tabernacle to God's service (Numbers 7) and they're ready to start the journey to Canaan, the Promised Land.

(By the way, the early chapters of Numbers aren't the dry-as-dust rehearsal of names and figures we sometimes treat them as. They're an instruction manual for an army (and a people) on the march. It was for military reasons that "All the Israelites twenty years old or more who were able to serve in Israel's army were counted according to their families" (Numbers 1:45), then organised in divisions of three tribal groups each. The four divisions were led by the tribes of Judah, Reuben, Ephraim and Dan (Numbers 2:3-31), each tribe and each division being identified by its tribal flag (Numbers 1:52). Judah's symbol was a lion, Reuben's a man, Ephraim's an ox and Dan's an eagle. These same symbols appear in the visions of the four living creatures in Ezekiel 1:10 and Revelation 4:7, a shorthand, as it were, for "all Israel", as an army and as the people of God on the march. This reminds us we need to search the totality of the Scriptures if we're to understand and apply them properly. So, don't be put off the book of Numbers. Like all Scripture, it "is God-breathed, and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:16-17).)

Numbers relates how, with all the necessary practical arrangements made, the Israelites "set out from the mountain of the LORD [Sinai]" (Numbers 10:33) to continue their journey to the Promised Land. But a constant succession of complaints, backslidings, rebellions and human failings mean they fail to reach this objective. They complain about their hardships (Numbers 11:1-3) and monotonous diet of manna (Numbers 11:4-6). Aaron and Miriam rebel against Moses' leadership (Numbers 12:1-15). Ten of the twelve spies sent into Canaan give a falsely pessimistic report (Numbers 13:26-33), leading to more grumbling against Moses and against God (Numbers 14). Korah, Dathan, Abiram and others "rose up against Moses" (Numbers 16:1-2), so "the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and ... they went down alive into the grave" (Numbers 16:32-33). Yet even so, only a little later

the people again “quarrelled with Moses” (Numbers 20:3). There was further frustration when Edom refused to allow passage through its territory (Numbers 20:14-21). Aaron died (Numbers 20:22-29) and there was armed conflict against the Canaanite king of Arad (Numbers 21:1-3). A lot of water’s passed under the bridge by the time we pick up the story as Israel “travelled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom.” (Numbers 21:4).

The bronze snake

It's sometimes said one of the definitions of madness is doing the same thing and expecting different results. For the Israelites, it's like the record is stuck. There's the same old litany of complaints that they've been rehearsing over and over virtually from the moment they left Egypt: “the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, ‘Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!’” (Numbers 21:4-5). This isn't where God wants His people to be. The same power at work when Moses lifted up the bronze snake – that same salvation- and life-giving power Jesus tells Nicodemus about – can deliver us from this kind of captivity and this kind of living death. For anyone who's in the kind of place the Israelites were in, be assured this is a treadmill God wants to help you get off. If you feel you're forever going round and round the same circuit with no end in sight, God wants to help you break that cycle. I'd encourage you to ask people you trust to pray for you, and to pray with the power and authority that Jesus wants His followers to exercise: commanding demons to go, stopping up access for anything that might be affecting you through your maternal or paternal blood lines, breaking off you whatever's holding you captive, giving you space to renounce wrong soul ties, to repent and forgive where necessary.

Often, we need other people to help us with this kind of thing. It's not easy to get out from under a curse on our own, but these things are easily dealt with when the power of God's at work. Don't stay a moment longer under a curse you can be free of in an instant. Seeking another's help was what the Israelites did when: “The LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. 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.” (Numbers 21:6-7).

There are a number of things to notice about the people's reaction and God's response:

The implication is that they knew full well the LORD had sent the snakes, and done it because they'd been speaking against God and His chosen prophet. Poisonous snakes aren't unusual in the regions Israel was travelling through – there are horned vipers, puff-adders, cobras, and carpet vipers – but the number and concentration of them obviously was.

They knew that speaking against God and Moses was sinful. A snake (serpent) is a symbol of sin and judgment, referring back to the temptation of Adam and Eve and their resulting expulsion from the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3). The punishment fitted the crime in this particular case, because Israel had also tried to be “like God” (Genesis 3:5) by second guessing His plans, purposes and provision.

They confessed their sin, though it's not clear they repented of it. As they'd often done before, they were relying on Moses to be their intermediary. On Sinai they'd said to him, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.” (Exodus 20:19). Just like Pharaoh, who'd also said “I have sinned” and asked Moses to “pray to the LORD” during the plague of thunder and hail (Exodus 9:27-28), they'd do and say anything to get out of trouble, then go back to their old habits once their feet were no longer being held to the fire.

But “the LORD is slow to anger” (Nahum 1:3) and “forgiving and good” (Psalm 86:5). He says, “I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live.” (Ezekiel

33:11). And so, despite everything, God provided Moses with a miraculous solution to the infestation of snakes. Note that the snakes weren't taken away and weren't prevented from biting people. Their bites didn't cease to be poisonous. But God, as it were, provided the antidote. He did it purely out of His goodness and mercy: "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6:23)

God's solution might at first glance be surprising, since the Ten Commandments forbid the making of graven images (Exodus 20:4-6). Closer inspection, though, shows the mischief this aims to prevent is idolatry ("You shall not bow down to [idols] or worship them": Exodus 20:5), and the bronze snake wasn't intended to be worshipped as a false god. "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.' 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, he lived." (Numbers 21:8-9). (Incidentally, as a sad commentary on our human tendency to misuse things God has provided for good, the bronze snake *was* later worshipped as an idol. Many hundreds of years after these events, king Hezekiah "broke [it] into pieces ... for up to that time the Israelites had been burning incense to it. (It was called Nehushtan.)" (2 Kings 18:4).

(Nehushtan is a diminutive of the noun *nehoshet*, probably meaning, a little thing of bronze, but can also mean, harlotries. Its root word *nahash* means snake but also technological expertise or intuitive, impure or detrimental mental processes. In identical verb form means to divine or soothsay. So, the word *nahash* brings together the idea of a snake with the sort of temptations the serpent brought in the Garden of Eden when he told Adam and Eve: "your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (Genesis 3:5).)

Specific instructions were given to make the snake out of bronze, not from a precious metal. Bronze is an alloy of two base metals (copper and tin), so symbolises our sinful nature and God's righteous judgment. People were to look at it, or gaze at it (as some translations render it). The Hebrew word is *ra'a*, meaning to gaze intently, to see and believe. So, we're not talking about a quick glance in the bronze snake's direction. There was something that needed to be pondered, understood and taken to heart.

With all this in mind, we can start to see why Jesus said to Nicodemus something we too often skate over because we think it doesn't make sense or is an unfair criticism: "You are Israel's teacher ... and do you not understand these things?" (John 3:10). Nicodemus and Israel's other spiritual leaders had the Old Testament Scriptures, from which they could have drawn much better conclusions as to how God wants His people to live. Jesus goes on to say, "I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?" (John 3:12). Then He gives an earthly example (the bronze snake) followed by a heavenly one (the Son of Man).

Jesus our salvation

And now we start to get to the real meat of what's going on in the Old Testament episode, and how this plays out in the New Testament era. The bronze snake was a symbol of sin. It was there to help the Israelites acknowledge what they'd done and to recognise that it *was* sin. Or, to put it another way, they had to lay aside pretences and excuses, and call evil by its name. When we do this, and at the same time allow God to act in our lives, evil loses its power over us. The Bible says, "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter." (Isaiah 5:20). That's precisely what we're currently doing in our society and it's a recipe for disaster. It allows free rein to what's bad and cuts off access to the good things God wants us to enjoy. Instead of denying what's true, we need to do the opposite. What's evil needs to be presented to (lifted up before) our people and it needs to be *called* evil. If that was done, there'd be clarity in place of our present confusion and many who are suffering and dying an eternal death from the snakebites of sin will live. Of course, recognising evil and calling it by

its name is only the start. If that's all we do, we risk creating a "house unoccupied, swept clean and put in order" (Matthew 12:45) that will be easy prey for "seven other spirits more wicked" than the first to come and occupy. (Matthew 12:45).

Which brings us to the second part of the equation. Jesus told Nicodemus, "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life" (John 3:14-15). Later, Jesus twice reinforced this point; "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am the one I claim to be and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me." (John 8:28). And again: "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." (John 12:32). In the clearest of words, Jesus likened his crucifixion to the lifting up of the bronze snake. The bronze snake was lifted up on a wooden pole, and in the same way, Christ was lifted up on a wooden cross. The snake on a pole brought salvation for the Israelites who looked on it, just as Jesus' death on a cross brings salvation for those who trust (believe) in Him. The essential difference, of course, is that in the Old Testament episode involving a plague of snakes, salvation was only from physical death. Whereas salvation through Christ is so that we "may have eternal life." (John 3:15).

The snake, a symbol of sin and judgment, was lifted up from the earth and put on a wooden pole (or a tree), which was a symbol of a curse. Peter deliberately used the word "tree" to describe the cross in Acts 5:29 and 1 Peter 2:24. Paul implicitly did the same when he wrote, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.'" (Galatians 3:13, referencing Deuteronomy 21:23). And Paul told the church in Corinth that "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Once again, we see the truth of the saying that the Old Testament is the New Testament concealed, and the New Testament is the Old Testament revealed.

Application

Three points for us by way of application:

Dealing with sin in our lives: "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires." (Galatians 5:24). Are there sins we need to recognise in our own lives and call by their name, so they'll no longer keep us in their power? We're told to "work out our salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12), and part of what this involves is dealing with any residue of sin or the demonic that still has a foothold in our lives.

Calling sin by its name: Today is May Day, known in Celtic paganism as Beltane, a festival that marks the mid-point between the Spring equinox and summer solstice. It's associated with fertility rituals like dancing round the maypole and with lifting up (crowning) of the Queen of Heaven – whereas, of course, we should be lifting up the son of Man. The false goddess (demonic being) called the Queen of Heaven is spoken about in two separate passages of Jeremiah: "The children gather wood, the fathers light the fire, and the women knead the dough and make cakes of bread for the Queen of Heaven. They pour out drink offerings to other gods and provoke me to anger. But am I the one they are provoking? Declares the LORD. Are they not rather harming themselves, to their own shame?" (Jeremiah 7:18-19; see also Jeremiah 44:15-19 and 44:25). That's a fair description of what plenty of people in our nation are doing: worshipping false gods and in the process "harming themselves, to their own shame" (Jeremiah 7:19) because no-one's told them otherwise. We're the ones who have to call sin by its name in our nation, to warn people that what they think of as harmless diversions or activities without consequences are anything but that.

Lifting up the Son of Man: What does this look like in our day? Well, in everyday speech we have the expression, to put someone on a pedestal. It's often used in a way that suggests something negative,

as if we've made more of someone than we really ought, or there's an element of delusion in what we're doing. But there's no danger of either of those things with Jesus. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Let's start to give Him the praise and glory in our nation that are His due. Amen.