

**St Nicholas Sighthill Parish Church**  
**Sermon 15<sup>th</sup> March 2015:**  
**Numbers 21: 4-9 & John 3:14-21**

**Numbers 21: 4-9 The Snake Made of Bronze (GNT)**

<sup>4</sup>The Israelites left Mount Hor by the road that leads to the Gulf of Aqaba, in order to go around the territory of Edom. But on the way the people lost their patience <sup>5</sup>and spoke against God and Moses. They complained, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt to die in this desert, where there is no food or water? We can't stand any more of this miserable food!” <sup>6</sup>Then the LORD sent poisonous snakes among the people, and many Israelites were bitten and died. <sup>7</sup>The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Now pray to the LORD to take these snakes away.” So Moses prayed for the people. <sup>8</sup>Then the LORD told Moses to make a metal snake and put it on a pole, so that anyone who was bitten could look at it and be healed. <sup>9</sup>So Moses made a bronze snake and put it on a pole. Anyone who had been bitten would look at the bronze snake and be healed.



**John 3:14-21 (GNT)**

<sup>14</sup>As Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the desert, in the same way the Son of Man must be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. <sup>16</sup>For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup>For God did not send his Son into the world to be its judge, but to be its saviour.

<sup>18</sup>Those who believe in the Son are not judged; but those who do not believe have already been judged, because they have not believed in God's only Son. <sup>19</sup>This is how the judgment works: the light has come into the world, but people love the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds are evil. <sup>20</sup>Those who do evil things hate the light and will not come to the light, because they do not want their evil deeds to be shown up. <sup>21</sup>But those who do what is true come to the light in order that the light may show that what they did was in obedience to God.



## Sermon

**<sup>14</sup> As Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the desert, in the same way the Son of Man must be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.**

Let's first have a recap on the reason for the bronze snake, which appeared in our second reading. It is referring to our first reading which was from the book of Numbers.

**Then the LORD sent poisonous snakes among the people, and many Israelites were bitten and died. <sup>7</sup> The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Now pray to the LORD to take these snakes away." So Moses prayed for the people. <sup>8</sup> Then the LORD told Moses to make a metal snake and put it on a pole, so that anyone who was bitten could look at it and be healed.**

How far do the demands of faith go before we would give up, as the Israelites were giving up after many years in the wilderness?

Some people are asked to put their trust in things they know are true, in promises they are sure they will receive.

Some people are asked to put trust in things they cannot know for certain, and have to take the risk for something they think **they might receive.**

But some people are asked to give and follow and commit themselves for a blessing that only someone else will receive.

Anyone asked to pay the ultimate price, giving their life for another; anyone who would stop at nothing to bring benefit to someone they love; and of course many mothers do that for their children.....and of course that is one of the reasons to stop and pause and thank God for our mothers on this day – Mothering Sunday.

Turning to our New Testament reading:

**John 3:16 is one of the best known, most loved verses in the New Testament.**

**<sup>16</sup> For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life. John 3: 16**



Many Christians know the verse well because it is the expression of God's love for the world and promise of eternal life.

Its summary is the essential truth of Christian belief. But the quotation tempts us to isolate it from its place within the Gospel of John.

However, when we read further, we may wish we hadn't, for the following verses seem contradictory.

How can God so love the world that God sent his son in order to save the world (verse 17) and at the same time condemn so many in it (verse 18)?

**<sup>18</sup> Those who believe in the Son are not judged; but those who do not believe have already been judged, because they have not believed in God's only Son.**

We encounter a characteristic of the Gospel of John in this reading about the sharp divisions between believers and non-believers, saved and condemned, people who love darkness rather than light, do evil and not good (verses 19-21).

**<sup>19</sup> This is how the judgment works: the light has come into the world, but people love the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds are evil. <sup>20</sup> Those who do evil things hate the light and will not come to the light, because they do not want their evil deeds to be shown up. <sup>21</sup> But those who do what is true come to**

**the light in order that the light may show that what they did was in obedience to God.**

We should not silence Jesus by deciding what he should not have said and what our hearers should not hear." We cannot in other words be selective in quoting Jesus.....the Christian Faith is not one that allows us to choose the best parts such as love, joy and peace, but ignore the parts about faithfulness, sin and punishment.

Today's reading continues the story of Nicodemus, a Pharisee and leader of the Jews who comes to Jesus by night; he recognizes Jesus as a teacher from God (verse 1-2). Nicodemus acknowledges Jesus is sent from God, but he comes in secret.... Being seen with Jesus was bad for his image could be one explanation.

Earlier in the chapter, Jesus chides Nicodemus for his lack of understanding of scripture.

In the Gospel of John, some of the sharpest criticism is directed toward those people who believe, or have insight about Jesus, but kept it secret.

**A big and simple lesson for us today.....we should not keep secret our belief in Jesus....this is why it is so important to go into the nearby Sighthill Primary School, Calderglen Nursey, Napier University and Edinburgh College, the nearby homes and so on.....to connect with local people....but they are not coming here....**

No matter how fine a preacher and minister anyone is, we have to go to the people and tell them about Jesus...**and in our families, we need to speak up for Jesus.....**

Time spent in Church and worship is where we recharge our spiritual batteries, draw on God's wisdom and Grace, and pray for people who we intend to visit and tell them about Jesus.



An example of ordinary people in the New Testament who kept quiet about Jesus were the parents of the blind man who refused to make a public statement about Jesus for fear of being exiled from the synagogue (9:22). We hear the condemnation of "the Jews" but the disdain of the parents who forsake their son and refuse to confess Jesus

as Messiah in order to remain in the synagogue is equally severe.

Even some of the people in authority believed in Jesus, but did not confess it for fear of being expelled from the synagogue. (12:42-43).

The division in the First Century world was not just between Jews and Christians but Christians who separated themselves from the synagogue; whilst other believers choose to stay in the synagogue. ...they were the ones who thought you had to be a Jew first and then become a Christian.

The Gospel narrative indicates the experience of a minority group defining itself not only within the diversity of Judaism but also defining itself among followers of Jesus and hence you have descriptions of people throughout the John Gospel that are very precise: For example,

You were either in or out of group: you were a Roman citizen or a tribe of Israel, you belonged to a trade guild in the Roman Empire, or you were in a religious organisation or cult. When people dithered on the margins of the emerging Christian house church, you were neither in or out.....**as is the case today**, with many nominal Christians.....who neither believe nor disbelieve in God, but they attend Church at Christmas. Believers are either **in** if they believe in Jesus or **out** if they do not. And that is why our second reading is so important.....its statements are very black and white.

Jesus does not give us the options to be lukewarm Christians....we are either in or out.....

The purpose of the reading is not to exclude people, rather to support those who are on the road to belonging. John's intent may have been to encourage others to join them.....just as Jesus encouraged Nicodemus to believe in him.....which of course Nicodemus eventually recognised Jesus as the Christ because we read of him ensuring the body of Jesus got a proper burial along with Joseph

In our hands, the gospel of John can do serious harm, if we do not explain scripture faithfully. So it is important that we make an effort to enter into the world of John when we interpret scripture.

John 3:16 John begins with echoes of Genesis (1:1) and the goodness of God's creation, the world, all that is in it. That note is sounded again so clearly here. For the sake of this world, God gives his most cherished beloved son.

Many parents parent knows that the love for one's child is so great one might sacrifice oneself for a child. In this human experience we grasp God's self-giving love for us, giving us the incomparable gift of salvation, life forever through his beloved Son.

How else to respond but to love and cherish the world and every creature in it as beloved of God. If we take this response seriously, it will be an all-consuming challenge.

Opportunities stretch from our doorstep, down the street to around the world. We do not have to make it our business to judge who is saved or not, condemned or not. ....that is what God does.....we just have to invite them into the family of God and in so doing we are passing on this remarkable and wonderful promise:

For God so loved the world that who so ever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.



We live in exciting times for this church fellowship...there is so much to thank God for....and so much to look forward to. Not least with the induction of your new minister Tom on Wednesday evening.

All the building blocks for growth in this church family are in place.

Let us therefore renew our commitment to work together with your new minister Tom. Let us allow ourselves to be guided by the Holy Spirit to serve God in this community and let us do it with love and compassion in our hearts.

And let us remember every day, that God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whosoever believes in Him will not die but will have eternal love. Amen

**Come and say hello at  
St Nicholas Church  
We would love to see you**



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