

Reflection - The Fourth Sunday in Lent
10-03-2024
St Cuthbert's Anglican Church – Tweed Heads

Numbers 21: 4-9 Bronze Snake – People who turned away turned back

Psalms 107: 1-3, 17-22 Give thanks to God
He will rescue you if you turn back to him.

Ephesians 2: 1-10 Although dead, you have been made alive in Christ

John 3: 14-21 Jesus lifted up like the Snake
It is through Jesus we have eternal life

Introduction

As we continue our Lenten Journey today, I would like to look at a significant theme of Lent, which is “Turning back to God”.

And I'd also like to look at this same theme, but through another lens, that is, “Turning back to God” is also about, “Finding God's Love”.

Bronze Snake – Turning Back

So firstly, “Turning back to God”. Lent is an intentional time set aside in our Church Calendar, when we should be carving out time and energy to turn back to God.

In today's Old Testament reading from the book of Numbers, we have a very clear story of the Israelites turning back to God. Often stories from the Old Testament which have a physical aspect to them are mirrored in the New Testament by stories of a spiritual nature.

The story today from the book of Numbers is of the Israelites, whilst they were on their journey out of Egypt to the Promised Land. We hear how they began speaking against God and Moses. Even after God had bought the people out of slavery, and they were headed for the promised land they were still unhappy with God. The consequence of their rejection of God was that snakes were sent to bite them, and many died. When the Israelites realized the error of their ways, they decided to, “Turn back to God”. They realized they should not have spoken against God and Moses. They acknowledged their wrongdoing and asked Moses to pray to God to take the snakes away.

God told Moses to put a bronze image of a snake on a pole, so the people could look at it and live. And that is what happened, because the people turned back to God, God enabled them to live.

There was nothing particularly special about the bronze snake, but rather it was simply a sign that the people had in fact, turned back to God.

Interestingly, later on in the bible in the book 2 Kings, we hear how the Godly King Hezekiah, actually destroyed the bronze snake, because the people were worshipping the snake and not God. (2 Kings 18:4)

Turning back to God is important in our lives. God is the most important thing, but sometimes we can make other things, even good things, more important, and we lose sight of God, the most important thing. We have to be careful, not to turn things that help us know God, into things that stop us from putting God first.

An example of this is how I once witnessed some people treat Holy Communion, in a previous place where I was ministering. I don't want you to misunderstand me, I believe the two sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion, are critically important for us as Christians in the Anglican tradition, but I witnessed some people be very dismissive of other aspects of their faith and church life, whilst they just wanted to get, "their Communion". They had turned communion into an idol, and wanted that before God.

In our lives we constantly need to be, turning back to God.

There are many things in life that may draw us away from God. Even good things might draw us away from God. So, we need to be on our guard, and not let the devil fool us into turning away from God.

And we need to be like the Israelites in today's story. When they realized that they had not put God first, they repented and turned back to God, and were given the freedom to live again.

Look to Jesus – Finding Love

Another way of turning back to God, is finding God's love.

In John's Gospel today we hear these words,

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3:14-16)

Just as the Israelites lived physically because they looked at the bronze snake, we can live with God's love for all eternity when we look to Jesus.

Jesus is the way to finding God's love for us. As Christians we are called to put all of our faith, and all of our hope, and all of our trust in what Jesus has done for us, and when we do this, we can experience God's forgiveness and God's love.

Believing in Jesus like this, is a lot more than just knowing that Jesus was an historical figure who lived 2000 years ago. Unless we fully commit to knowing and trusting Jesus entirely in our lives, then we won't experience the saving grace that God offers us in Jesus.

And continuing on in chapter 3 of John's Gospel in verse 17 and 18 we hear,

'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.

(John 3:17-18)

Jesus has come to save us. I have a great little meme, with a picture of Jesus in the middle and all the Marvel superhero's standing around him, and Jesus saying, "And that's how I saved the World."

God doesn't want to condemn us. God wants to save us, and Jesus is the way to finding salvation.

The challenging thing about sharing this wonderful Good News we have about Jesus is that many people don't think they need to be saved. Our culture now in the western world is very materialistic, and so many peoples world views don't even consider the spiritual aspect of our lives. But we only need to turn on the news to see that we are drawn to a better world than the one that we live in now. And we are currently experiencing what sociologists have called a loneliness epidemic. The reality is that we do need to be saved. The reality is that we all need love, and we all seek love in our lives, and the best way to find the ultimate in love is to turn to Jesus.

As we admit that we, like the Israelites, are not perfect, and when we repent and turn to Jesus, then we are assured and secure in God's love.

Our reading from Paul's letter to the Ephesians today puts it like this,

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not the result of works, so that no one may boast.
(Ephesians 2:8-9)

When we turn to God in Jesus, we receive the Gift of God's love.

If we know we are saved - Light and Darkness

So, what does our turning to God, and finding God's love mean for us.

Once we have this wonderful assurance, we learn our lives are not all about our wants and needs, but rather we are called to love back the God, who gives us such love.

And in "loving back" we are to share God's love with those around us.

In John 3:21 we hear,

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.'

And in Ephesians 2:10 we hear,

For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

When we know, and accept how much God loves us, our lives should then radiate that love out to those around us.

The usage of light and darkness in John's gospel is a wonderful metaphor. In our lives we should be seeking to be Light to those around us. Are those around you, drawn to the light that shines from within you?

Our lives are an ongoing journey. Sometimes we will have highs and sometimes we will have lows. But throughout life's journey, if we are secure in God's love, then that love should shine out, from who we are, into the world.

Conclusion

Lent is a time for reflection.

A time for turning back to God, or as some have put it a time for finding Gods love.

I pray that this lent we will turn back to God in Jesus, and that in doing this we might truly become God's light to the world around us. Amen.