



Sunday Reflection

Season of Lent

in the Charges of St Margarets, Renfrew
& St Johns, Johnstone



For Sunday 14 March 2021

Lent 4 - Laetare Sunday

As our worship this Lent draws us into God's presence it carries us with Christ on the road to Calvary, too. In acknowledging through praise, prayer and preaching Christ's work in the world, we also admit our own need for healing from the darkness that separates us from him.

Reflection for this week's Gospel

"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." *John 3:14-15*

An Illustration to set the scene

Three species of snake are native to mainland Britain. Two, the relatively common grass snake and the rare smooth snake, are non-venomous. Only the third, the increasingly uncommon adder, has a poisonous bite.

It is unusual for anyone to cross a snake's path, let alone be struck by one, and an adder's bite is rarely fatal; yet many British people, like those from warmer countries where dangerous snakes are endemic, are innately fearful of them.

St Patrick is supposed to have banished all snakes from Ireland – another story which hints that they are popularly perceived with distrust.



A snake coiled around a staff, known as the *Rod of Aesculapius*, has long been a symbol associated with medicine and healthcare.

Aesculapius was a Greek god of healing and non-venomous serpents were believed to have been used in therapeutic rituals that took place in temples dedicated to him, which may be the root of their link with medicine.

Other theories include a snake's supposedly rejuvenating properties, based upon its regular sloughing of skin to reveal shiny new scales, or highlight the use of ostensibly poisonous drugs, like venom, in healing.

Looking at the teaching of the Gospel

Aesculapius's rod became a symbol for many medical organisations, but the bronze serpent on a pole lifted up by Moses in the desert as a healing aid pre-dates his cult. It is an unusual image for John to have associated with Jesus and has not gained much popularity in Christian iconography.

Our Gospel reading begins amid the section of Jesus' discourse with Nicodemus where he has been describing the Son of Man (himself) descending and ascending, having privileged access to both earth and heaven.

The reference to Moses raising high the bronze serpent continues this imagery, since "lifted up" alludes to ascension.

This is the first of three sayings in John about "lifting up". Like the three passion statements found in the synoptic Gospels, it relates directly to Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection.

The Greek word the evangelist uses for “lifted up” can also mean “exalted” and exaltation is an integral aspect of John’s view of the cross; Christ’s sacrificial death demonstrating the glory of God.

Moreover, just as Moses’ bronze serpent has healing properties, so also is Jesus’ crucifixion salvific; it offers the possibility of eternal life. Salvation echoes too through today’s second reading from Ephesians, where Paul explains how those cut off by sin from a true relationship with God are restored into new life by Christ.

The closing verses of our Gospel reading outline the options for attaining eternal life in stark terms, using typical Johannine language of darkness and light, while also introducing God’s merciful love.

God gave Jesus to the world because God loves the world. “Gave” is a key word here: elsewhere in the Gospel God “sends” Jesus and so its use on this occasion underscores the depths of God’s relationship with creation.

The choice offered is binary, light and dark: accept the gift, admit your need for healing and salvation, believe, follow Jesus and receive eternal life; or reject it and remain lost in the world’s darkness.

How can we reflect on the application to our lives?

The traditional title for this day, Laetare Sunday, originates with the opening verses of the Mass text, “Laetare Jerusalem” – “Rejoice, O Jerusalem”. Along with the move from purple to rose for Sunday’s liturgical colour, that text hints at a shift in perspective. Penitential sobriety subtly lifts to reveal a shaft of Lenten light refracted through Good Friday to illuminate the resurrection joy of Easter Day.

Moses' raised bronze serpent offers relief from suffering, Paul in Ephesians shimmers with the triumph of Christ over death that clothes us in new life, and in the Gospel God's overriding love for creation gifts us the Son of Man, lifted up, exalted for the world's salvation.

Already each Lenten Sunday reflects Easter triumph, giving precedent for blurring boundaries between the liturgical seasons. Contemplation of the cross in Lent draws us from self-centred darkness into the healing light of service of our Lord.

Glimpsing that light now kindles our response, enhancing and enriching it, encouraging us to play our part in God's unfolding plan to bring all creation out of the shadows beyond Eastertide into eternity.

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Please share your response to this reflection to Rector@SECStJohnStMargaret.org.uk – did anything speak to you? Did you feel challenged, angered, consoled by something in the words? How did God's spirit move you as you read it? Have you shared the words with someone else? Is this a worthwhile thing to make available to folk whilst we cannot meet for corporate worship to share in word and sacrament? What are your thoughts?

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