



THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT

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March 14, 2021

Anglican Parish of Raymond Terrace
www.stjohnsraymondterrace.org

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Pray

I speak to you in the name of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen



Our aim today is to appreciate that GOD's salvation is available to anyone who trusts GOD and looks to Him.

John 3:16 is frequently referred to as 'the gospel in a nutshell'. It comes towards the end of JESUS' famous conversation with Nicodemus in which JESUS has stressed the need to be born again. This might be better translated as 'born from above'. Nicodemus fails to understand and fades out of the conversation. JESUS expresses surprise at his ignorance; but recognises that only the Son of Man – JESUS Himself – is likely to really understand such deep teaching.

At this point JESUS makes reference to the strange incident in the wilderness recorded in the passage from Numbers 21. The people of Israel are grumbling once

again and in a desperate plight. GOD judges them and they are attacked by poisonous snakes. GOD tells Moses to lift up a poisonous snake on a pole and get anyone who has bitten to look at the snake in faith and they will be miraculously healed.

JESUS compares the Son of Man – Himself – to the snake. In John, the language often has double meanings and 'lifting up' has particular reference to JESUS being lifted up on the cross¹. When He has been crucified, He will give eternal life – not just temporary healing – to any believer who looks to Him. John 3:16 encapsulates this truth. In His love, GOD made an offer of eternal life to absolutely everyone who puts their faith in the crucified CHRIST. The sad thing, highlighted in the passage, is that although GOD did not send JESUS into the world to condemn and enact judgement – as He did with the snakes in the wilderness – but to save people, people condemn themselves by failing to believe. They prefer

¹ John 12:32-35

darkness to light – as we have already been told in the first chapter of John.



As I mentioned earlier, our gospel for today contains one of the most well-known and best-loved verses in the whole of John’s Gospel – John 3:16 – “GOD so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him might not perish but might have eternal life.” These words are spoken in the context of the night visit of Nicodemus to JESUS. Nicodemus, a Pharisee and Jewish leader and teacher, avoids the daylight that might reveal him as associating with a man who is unpopular with the religious institution, and so arouse suspicion of Nicodemus’ own motives and stance. To be unafraid or unashamed of professing our friendship with JESUS by the way we live every day brings hard demands. The German theologian Eugen Drewermann gives us a memorable image of ourselves when, in the words of the gospel, we have “preferred darkness to light,” to that light which is the only Son of GOD, given for its salvation

to the world that GOD loves so much. It seems that sometimes we can become like bats – becoming attuned to night-flying and not wanting our eyes to ever see light. We often prefer the false safety of darkness to the light of CHRIST that exposes, for example, our selfish, racist, sexist, or violent selves. We all have our own caves we need to name. Lent is designed to drag us out of their darkness into the Easter light of CHRIST through prayer, fasting and the “almsgiving” of the gift of ourselves as well as the offer of material assistance to our sisters and brothers in many kinds of need.

The Fourth Sunday in Lent marks the half-way point of the Lenten fast and has traditionally been marked with special activities. It is known as either **Mothering Sunday** or **Refreshment Sunday**. Dating back to the Industrial Revolution, the former title is a reference to the fact that this was the traditional day for apprentices and young people "in service" (*i.e.*, working as servants) to have a holiday to go home and visit their mothers,

bringing with them presents. Mothering Sunday is the original "Mother's Day" and reminds us of our natural mothers and also of our spiritual mother, the Church. The occasion is marked with a special holiday confection called simnel cake, baked with fine flour, sugar, and fruit – made expertly by our own Edith Hoy. In many churches today it is the custom to bring the simnel cake to church to be blessed and distributed. It is appropriate to present the cake at the Altar at the time of the Offertory. It is usually blessed before the Great Thanksgiving – which we will do then.

To help the night visitor, Nicodemus, to come to the light of understanding something of his mystery and mission, JESUS uses a good catechetical – a religious question and answer approach: He talks in the language of His listener. He reminds this teacher of Israel², who is very much in the dark, of a story from their own Hebrew Scriptures³. In the wilderness, the people grumble

² John 3:10

³ Numbers 21: 4-9

against GOD and are struck with a plague of serpents whose bite could cause death. The people come to Moses, admit their sinfulness, and ask him to intercede for them with GOD. When He does so, GOD tells Moses to forge a bronze serpent, fix it and raise it up before those who are stricken. If they gaze on it, they will be saved. This seems a great paradox: healing and life from gazing on a creature of death! But they obey and are healed.

In our humanity, we are all bitten by death – yet JESUS tells Nicodemus – that the GOD who is love wants to give us life that never ends. And so, the flesh of the Son of Man will be brutally and senselessly twisted around the wood of the cross, forged by the fire of His passion and death – and raised up for our salvation. In John's Gospel, "raising" or "lifting up" always has the double sense of crucifixion and exaltation, death and resurrection, for the 2 movements are inseparable. To gaze with the eyes of faith on this mystery and commit ourselves to it will mean eternal life. JESUS did not come to judge; but just as

turning on a light exposes what is hidden in darkness, so it is when the light of CHRIST shines upon us to expose both good and evil. The cross that will be raised up and venerated on Good Friday will give way at the Easter Vigil to the raised candle – marked with the cross of fragrant “nails of incense”, from which we catch fire and rekindle our baptismal commitment to the saving and universal love of JESUS CHRIST.



Today’s Gospel refers to an event that occurred as the people of Israel sojourned in the desert after their escape from slavery in Egypt and before entering the Promised Land. The people, weary from their travel, complained bitterly against GOD and Moses: “why have you brought us up from Egypt to die in the wilderness, where there is no food and water? We are disgusted with this wretched food⁴. The people are punished for their complaints with serpent bites – and then saved from their punishment

⁴ Numbers 21:5

when GOD commands Moses, "Make a seraph and mount it on a pole, and everyone who has been bitten will look at it and recover." And now in today's gospel, JESUS is compared to this "sign of salvation" for when He is lifted up, "everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life."

In this 21st century world, there is a culture that oftentimes does not recognise CHRIST or Christian values. We can inadvertently be drawn into the temptation of forgetting our religious heritage. We need to remain faithful to JESUS not only for ourselves but also for the well-being of all peoples. GOD loves the world more than we can understand or deserve. His desire is that we all be saved. By our Christian witness we can be instruments through which the saving grace of JESUS is communicated to all by bringing refreshment to others.



May we pray:

Son of GOD, though we sometimes close our eyes to your light, we long to see your glory. Strengthen us so that

we may turn toward your light and keep our eyes fixed on your path – for you live and reign with GOD the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one GOD for ever and ever. Amen.

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