

4TH SUNDAY IN LENT

Revd. Cara Heafey, Associate Minister, Summertown URC



Photograph by Carolyn Wheeler

READ: NUMBERS 21:4-9

...the LORD said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live."

REFLECT:

The picture above is of Bramble, one of our three rescue dogs. Bramble is a loveable and sweet-natured companion, but she has become fearful outside of the house, which manifests in behaviours like pulling on the lead, lunging and barking, and she's a big, strong dog with a loud, deep bark. So last week we sought the advice of an animal behaviourist in an on-line consultation.

Our first piece of homework / training is to play a game with Bramble where she's rewarded for giving us her attention. We throw a little treat on to the ground and the moment she looks back towards us we say "good girl" and throw down another. The idea is to build Bramble's trust in us, and to teach her to keep her attention on us so that she's less distracted and fearful on her walks. Bramble excels at this game, she loves food and is

quick to turn back towards where the next treat might come from... although her gaze goes to the packet of treats rather than to us, so we're finding ourselves lifting the packet up to chin-height to try to bring her attention to our faces!

It's not a perfect analogy (and maybe it's a thinly veiled excuse to talk about our beloved dogs!) but it seems like the Israelites' desert years had a similar purpose. The wilderness is a kind of training school, where God is trying to build a relationship with this group of forgetful and easily distracted humans, to hold their attention, to teach them to trust.

This episode from the book of Numbers is a weird and difficult story. It probably wouldn't have made it into the lectionary were it not for the connection with the Gospel reading set for today (John 3:14-21), where Jesus compares Moses lifting the serpent to the Son of Man being lifted up. It raises some deeply uncomfortable questions, like: is it so wrong to complain? What's the difference between complaint and the rich Biblical tradition of lament? Are suffering and death caused so directly and deliberately by God? How do we reconcile such teaching methods with the image of God as gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love? In recent times dog-training has moved from a dominance and deterrence model to methods based on empathy, understanding and reward / affirmation. In some ways there has been a similar trend in theology!

Without dismissing these tensions, perhaps this story has resonances for us. There's a darkly comic aspect to the way the people undermine their own complaint. "It's not fair... we have no food... and we hate this miserable food!" What an insight into human nature, our tendencies towards exaggeration and ingratitude. Much later in the Old Testament we learn that the bronze snake-staff has become an idol, an object of worship in itself (a bit like Bramble seeing the packet as the provider of treats, rather than the human who's dispensing them!). It's a reminder to me that it's good to grapple with parts of the Bible that confront and confound my image of what God is like, lest that image should become an idol.

How interesting that the emblem of a snake coiled around a staff - the vehicle for healing in this story - is associated still with the field of medicine. In our own present time of wilderness and deadly disease, we look to the miraculous medical advancements in treatment and vaccination to save us.

And finally, this story reminds us that the road to redemption leads us through the valley of shadow. The journey of lent will take us to Good Friday and the cross. Our faith doesn't enable us to bypass suffering, but teaches us to trust God through it, to keep our eyes on Jesus so that we won't be afraid.

PRAY:

- Give thanks for the vaccination roll-out and the hope it brings, and for our access to healthcare. Pray for this provision to be universal.
- That we will learn the hard lessons of this wilderness time.

SUPPORT:

Pauline and myself, and your elders, are here for you if you need someone to talk to, have a prayer request, or just fancy a chat! Ping us an email or give us a ring.