

Lent 4

John 3 14-15 As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.

This is a curious verse. It comes at the end of a conversation between Nicodemus - a Pharisee and, we are told, a ruler of the Jews, who had come to see Jesus at night. It is an answer to a question

This was the conversation where, you may recall, Jesus tells him that unless a person is born again, he or she cannot see the kingdom of God.....one of the most often quoted texts in the Bible.

Nicodemus was puzzled; and a little frightened. Born again? So Jesus speaks about being born of water and the spirit, but Nicodemus still does not understand and asks: *how can these things be?*

The verse we read was the answer: these things will happen if and when the Son of Man is lifted up like Moses lifted the serpent - then whosoever believes in him will not perish, but have a new form of life - called 'eternal' life.

John speaks about a deep transformation that is possible for us, but to understand what he is saying, we need to know about a contrast that comes again and again in the gospel:

John contrasts two worlds: the impermanent world of material things - the 'world *down here*' (*kato*, below), versus the eternal world of the spirit 'the *up world*' (*ano* - above).

In the kingdom of *kato* (below - the world we see with our eyes), the self and the ego is always trying to elbow its way in and take control.

But in the other realm - the kingdom of *ano* - loving wisdom reigns.

Although this eternal realm is all around us, we don't see it.

Each of us is a mixture of both realms; each of us has a mixture of the world and the spirit. Very often these two aspects of ourselves and the world are at war with each other, but St John's message is that in the incarnation (the word made flesh) they can be brought into harmony. In the 'lifting up' the two worlds can embrace - there can be a marriage.

We too, may often have been asked: "Have you been born again?"

But when we look at the Greek word for born *again*, it means literally born 'from above' ...*ano-then*.

Jesus is inviting Nicodemus to understand that to be born *from above* is to see that the material world, the world of control and conflict where our self-centeredness is in charge *is not all that there is*:

that it can be infused with a wholly different realm of being.

Although some people may have a special moment of transcendence when grace gives them this insight all at once, for many of us, it is a life-times' hard work

...of catching a glimpse of this loving realm, moving beyond ego, seeing others suffering and responding with compassion, but then finding ourselves falling back again and again into the closed familiar world of self-centredness and petty demands.

For most of us, we have to be 'born from above' again and again.

So, how do we proceed?

First, St John's suggests - by starting to see the world differently - to start looking for the evidence of heaven - of the sacred - all around us..

We sometimes don't see what is all around us. We are blind to so much. Why? Because they are not part of our current concerns.

Stephen Verney gives the analogy of the nursery rhyme ('Pussy Cat pussy cat where have you been?') ... the cat that went to London to see the Queen ...do you recall what she saw, and what she did?

She went to see the queen but she saw a mouse under her chair. ...
In the world of cats there are mice under chairs.

I was listening to a talk by someone the other day. She works in the non-stop hectic world of Manhattan and described a time 8 years ago when she collapsed from exhaustion and overwork.

She realised she had to completely change her life. She did, and began to live her life more in the moment - taking care of herself, her family and colleagues.

A little while after this, she was walking with a friend in New York City and saw a building she'd not seen before. She asked...when did they build that - I didn't notice it going up. "About 1870" was the reply.

She just hadn't seen it - not part of her concerns - there but not there.

And we all know that feeling - there are things to do, always things to be getting on with. And this constant doing can make us blinkered, inattentive.
We may want to see the queen but all we see is the chair.

We don't have the time or energy to look beyond ourselves - and so we don't explore fully our own world or our own consciousness, with its material needs, yes, but also its spiritual invitations.

We don't explore who we could be when we are fully ourselves.

Sometimes it takes a crisis to bring us to our senses. Sometimes we find ourselves in a wilderness, not of our choosing.

St John says...don't ignore the wilderness - don't ignore your own earthiness, for seen in a different light, something sacred can also be seendon't even ignore your busyness, look at it; don't ignore those aspects of yourself you feel are selfish - look at them to see what deep need may be expressed in them.

What is being offered here is not a new life that ignores the old one; that makes us 'holier than thou';
...but an ability to grasp a new realm of being that sees, underneath all our striving, a yearning for peace, that recognizes a deep longing to be free to live a different sort of life.

Second: Jesus says...this coming together of two worlds is possible, *when I am lifted up*.... lifting up onto the cross will be the bridge that allows the two realms of our existence to be reconciled.

Notice the story from the Exodus that is used as the analogy. *"Just as Moses lifted up the serpent..."*.

It refers to a time in the wilderness when the Children of Israel were grumbling about there being no good food or water,
....there appeared a plague of fiery serpents ...they bit some of the people and they died.

The people repented and Moses prayed for them.

The story records that God told him to make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole.
"Then everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live".

Moses did as he was bidden - made a serpent of bronze, and it had exactly this effect
....those who were bitten and looked at it did not die.

It is a strange ancient story about the consequences of lack of faith, about Moses' power of intercession between his people and their God, and about God's power to deal with the curious dangers that lurked in the wilderness.

But notice that the fiery serpents are not *removed* by the prayer of Moses - they were still there - still striking out with their venom . What has changed it that the bite of the serpent is no longer fatal.

And for it to be rendered harmless, the people have to raise their eyes and look at what they most fear....the healing comes not from the removal of the source of suffering but from looking towards the very suffering itself. That's where the healing comes from.

We need to look up to see the outstretched arms of God reaching down to us - but our courage fails us.

So **third**, why do we find it so difficult to look?

Could it be because our shame stings us, so we turn away from anything that reminds us of our limits, our brokenness, our failures? If so, could it be that we are turning away from the very thing that might heal us?

A few weeks ago I was talking to some friends about what we imagine when we imagine the face of Jesus.

For me, the image of Jesus that has stayed from my childhood was a beautiful image, but also troubling.

It is a close up of the head and shoulders of Jesus, looking straight out of the painting at the onlooker.....it hung on the wall of my bedroom when I was a boy.

There were many spare paintings in our house when I was growing up, and I liked this one. I put it up there. But it had a sting in it. For the caption underneath read:

Then Jesus turned and looked at Peter, and Peter remembered....

It captures the moment after Peter had denied knowing Jesus for the third time, and the cock had crowed, when according to Luke, their eyes had met.

That picture that I had grown up with affected me deeply, but it was troubling, because part of me kept seeing that gaze as being searching and all-knowing - knowing all the times I had done wrong, and, in terms of my faith, betrayed and abandoned my Lord.

Seen one way, that gaze of Jesus just makes me or anyone else feel guilty. How could any of us bear to look into such an all-knowing face? All we want to do is look away in shame.

Then one day recently I was talking to an elderly priest - one the most compassionate people I have ever met.

I was telling him about this childhood picture, and how it held such a complex meaning. How it held my attention in its beauty, but also how it made me want to turn away and hang my head.

He said....look again at Jesus' face in that picture in your mind. Look, look again.

Was it really a look of accusation to Peter? And I suddenly realized...no, it was a face of compassion and forgiveness.

For the Jesus in that picture knew beforehand what would happen - he had even *told* Peter. He'd forecast exactly this and must have known how it would torture Peter afterwards.

He must have thought: "Oh Peter, I so wish you didn't have to be dragged through all of this".

It was a look of love.

And when we are self-centred again and again - when we do things we regret, say things that can't be unsaid, when we can't make amends, because the moment is passed, the person we have wronged has gone - St John invites us to look into the face of Jesus, to see the look that says that whatever we have done and whatever we have been, God knows, yes, but God forgives, God heals, God loves.

But we have to look.

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up.

We have to look to see ourselves as we are in our brokenness then stay long enough to look to see for ourselves the compassion, the understanding, the assurance in the gaze of Jesus Christ,

to see that in and through Him we can discover something of heaven inside us that is worth cultivating,

to trust his promise that he can re-unite heaven and earth in each one of us by the indwelling of his Holy Spirit.

to believe that something about us will not perish but will see a new, and an eternal transformed life.

Amen

Let us sit in silence for a few moments.