

Fearful decisions that can lead to a new life, new purposes and possibilities

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Lent 4 / Mothering Sunday – Num 21 4-9, Jn 3 14-21

I remember Victor Borge talking in one of his skits about his grandfather who invented a cure for which there was no disease. Back to front ideas like that are puzzling and arresting. They certainly grab people's attention.

There's something back to front in this morning's readings that seems to have a similar effect. God tells Moses to fashion a bronze image of a serpent, a creature scripture names as cursed. ^{Gen 3.15} We heard Moses was told to raise a bronze serpent on a pole so people who'd been bitten by snakes could look at it and live. It worked, but on the face of it, it seemed like a reverse hair-of-the-dog remedy.

Jesus took up this image and compounded its strangeness one night when he was visited by a Pharisee called Nicodemus. Nicodemus was one of the most senior Jewish religious figures at that time. He visited Jesus at night presumably so that no-one would notice. Jesus was someone the religious authorities were doing all they could to sideline and silence. To be caught visiting Jesus was not good public relations for a Pharisee. Nicodemus was taking quite a risk. In Jesus' position, I think I'd have been relieved that at least one of the authorities might take me seriously and try to deepen the friendship. But not Jesus.

After baffling Nicodemus with his teaching about being born again, Jesus went on to confront him with an image of himself as being just like the cursed serpent of Moses up on the pole.

He's talking about his crucifixion, and the fact that his being raised on the cross is a means of healing for anyone who can truly see. Nicodemus certainly can't *truly* see at the moment, but he will understand later. We know this because Nicodemus, Joseph of Arimathea and the women will be the only followers of Jesus brave enough to claim Jesus' body from the cross and lay him to rest.

Today, Nicodemus shows us how embracing a change that you fear might spell your end is a decision that leads to new life, new purpose and new possibility. International women's day on Friday celebrated many women who've demonstrated that to us; few more powerfully than Lowitja O'Donoghue, whose life was celebrated with a state funeral on that day. Today, we see Nicodemus risk his standing in his own community for the sake of an instinct that this dangerous Jesus might just be the one he should follow. ... And of course, God took the risk too, loving us this way; he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life. Risk-taking is our calling and that calling comes from our risk-taking Lord. I pray that we open ourselves bravely to this adventure. Amen.