

The Church is our Mother

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Lent 4b Mothering Sunday – Num 21 4-19, Ps 107 1-3, 17-22, Eph 2 1-10, Jn 3 14-21

Introduction to the readings for the younger people

We're about to hear an episode in the adventures of the Israelites that doesn't appear in many children's Bibles.

After God rescued the Israelites from being slaves in Egypt, they often grumbled about things on their journey – especially about the food. Today, they even grumbled against God and against their leader Moses.

God sent fiery serpents among them and lots of Israelites were bitten and died. They realised how wicked they'd been. They said they'd been wrong to complain, and they asked Moses to pray that God would take away the serpents from them. Moses did pray, but God didn't take the serpents away. Strangely, God told Moses to make a fiery serpent and set it up on a pole. Moses made one out of bronze and set it up on a pole, and from then on, if anyone was bitten by fiery serpent, they had to look at this bronze fiery serpent and then they wouldn't die. One person said that this means '... Israel can't become so terminally ill that God isn't able to heal them'. ^{(T B}

Dozeman, NIBC II – The Book of Numbers, p.167)

In today's Gospel story, Jesus reminds someone about this old snake on the pole story. Jesus meets a man who's wondering about becoming his follower – a man called Nicodemus. He's a Pharisee; a Jewish religious leader. Jesus tells Nicodemus, *I will be like the serpent set up on the pole*. He means that when we see him up on the Cross – which is a sign of death – we'll see that he's the way the world can be rescued from death.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that he came to rescue the world – not to condemn the world, but to save the world. Nicodemus listened to Jesus, and even though he was very secretive that night, he would become one of the bravest of Jesus' followers.

We still remember the danger of death leading to life in the Church when we are baptized. We go beneath the deep waters of death as the way Scripture tells us we enter abundant life in God's Kingdom.

Sermon

If Moses *had* prayed the way the people asked him to, he would have asked God to take the serpents away from them. Maybe he did pray that. But God didn't remove the snakes; people kept on getting bitten. But when they looked at Moses' bronze serpent, the bites didn't kill them any more. Is this a story about that eternal question of why a loving God allows suffering, or is it a story about a merciful God who sends healing into a world where our mortality means suffering is inevitable – *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son* ... is that what it's about?

These questions were still hanging around when Jesus talked with the Jewish leader called Nicodemus. Jesus linked the serpent on the pole with his crucifixion: ¹⁴*just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,* ¹⁵ *that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.* The Gospel tells us when we can really see, we'll know Jesus gives life where logically there should be death.

Nicodemus had come to Jesus secretly that night to avoid being noticed. You don't let on that a dangerous radical has captured your imagination if you value your social standing. Yet we know Nicodemus openly became a disciple soon after. We'll soon find him speaking up for Jesus against his fellow

religious leaders. ^{Jn 7.50-51} And we'll meet him again on Good Friday when he comes to his Lord again – this time to embalm him for burial. ^{Jn 19.39-42}

Nicodemus had been baffled just before, when Jesus told him he had to be born again. Today we come into that conversation as Jesus tells him about the Son of Man being lifted up like that bronze serpent Moses made. But still on Good Friday as Nicodemus risks everything to bury his Master, he doesn't yet know that his eyes will see Jesus again '*lifted up*' – from the grave, and finally from human sight at his Ascension; such knowledge is a privilege that we only have with hindsight.

So has our journey been travelled for us by Nicodemus and the other earliest Christians? Have they tackled all the questions of pain and suffering and healing in a world of mortals, and left us with the answers? No, they certainly haven't. The questions are new again in every generation. But we can learn from their journeys.

In today's story, Nicodemus is at one stage on the journey we're all travelling. He's come to Jesus to dip his toe in who knows what; to step over the edge of the certainties of his faith world. He's come secretly to visit someone who challenges his world; threatens to turn it upside down. What is it in Nicodemus that senses his yearning; and why him particularly, and not one of his fellow Jewish leaders?

Last week, we heard how the Holy Spirit lives inside us – places God's wisdom right on our hearts – hears the deepest yearnings of our hearts, and speaks them for us to the heart of God. In our listening prayer, we hear that conversation between our own hearts, and the fathomless love of the God who bends to hear us. As we hear our yearnings go out, our call is to follow them towards God. Like Nicodemus was called, the Spirit beckons to us as well. Will we also hear and follow?

Today, we're called to explore the paradox that we are at once

the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, and yet we and all creation live embraced in God. This Mothering Sunday, our collect prayer sees this embrace from inside: *Eternal God, in whom we live and move and have our being*. It's like an unborn baby might experience life in the womb. *Eternal God, in whom we live and move and have our being*. God holds the world in a loving embrace; an embrace so nurturing that it's like a womb.

On Mothering Sunday, one image we've inherited is that the Church is our Mother. This echoes something in the conversation Jesus had with Nicodemus. Jesus had told him you can't see the kingdom of God without being born again. Might that be where we fit in? Are we, the Church – called the bride of Christ – are we the living sanctuary, the womb, where God nurtures people's *life and movement and being* so that they and we may be born anew from here – from this community?

I think it means that on this Mothering Sunday, we remember that our mission as a church is to be a place, a people, of nurture, of nourishment, of warmth and welcome both for each other, and for anyone who is called to be born again into God's Kingdom, through this community. We nurture *life and movement and being*.

Today, may we lift up our eyes with Nicodemus to discover the paradox that we are at once the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, yet we are also embraced inside the journey of gestation in God. We *live and move and have our being* in God.
Amen