

SERMON: 14 March 2021 – Rev Alistair Cowper

Look Up and Live

Numbers 21:4-9

John 3:14-21

The road to the Promised Land is full of bumps and pot holes.

I say that because the older I get the more that seems to be true.

Life is never plain sailing. There are always set backs as well as the joys.

The people of Israel, God's people, were promised a land that would be full of milk and honey.

Better than where they were at present.

A land they could call their own and where everyone would be able to sit under their own fig tree and enjoy the suits of their own labour.

But there's a journey to make before all of that is in place.

The greatest setbacks we can encounter in life are setbacks of our own making.

Things that are a result of human selfishness.

Right from the beginning of the Scriptures we find that human nature us plagued with the problems caused by sin - that tiny wee word with 'I' in the centre.

And so in their complaining, God's people come across poisonous snakes.

Now there are questions here, which we might never be able to answer, like

Why did a loving God attack his people with poisonous snakes?

And then demand that they look to that which bit them in order to be healed?

"Everyone who is bitten shall look at (the poisonous serpent) and live"

(Numbers 21:8)

The snakes came about as a result of human wrongdoing - complaining, arguing, fighting.

But God, it seems, takes the very thing that is causing the pain and turns it into a means of healing.

It's as if God is saying to the people, look up, look up at that which is causing all the hurt, look up at it and start living, really living. And trust in this way for healing.

As one commentator has said of this passage,

“Rather than God simply removing the problem (instead it's when we) look upon our wrongdoing, the pain and hurt we cause, we begin to heal. Facing the issue is often the starting point towards renewal and growth in our communities and individually. In some bigger sense this passage, then, is a story about dealing with sin, hurt, pain in the world. You can't avoid it. We are called to face it and grow from there”.
(Spill The Beans 38).

As the people looked up to the bronze serpent and they thought deeply about their complaining and their selfishness and their arguing; rather than denying it or pretending it didn't exist, they began to see the grace and mercy beneath it all.

That, as they knew well from the Psalms, that God's steadfast love endures forever (Psalm 107:1) and after crying out he would send his word and heal them (Psalm 107:19-20).

Put aside for a moment who it was who sent the snakes in the first place and look at what happened as a result.

Even though the snakes bit the people and many died, we read that the people recognise they were wrong and come back to God via Moses asking him to pray for them.

And then God provides the rescue, the way out, the cure, the healing.

It's adversity or distress that awakens the spirit within.

Its not times of plenty or comfort but times of darkness and dis-ease.

And the spirit is roused and leads us back to God.

As Jonah prays that Psalm from the belly of the great fish, “in my distress I cried to you O Lord, and you heard my prayer” (Jonah 2, Psalm 120).

The Spirit of Christ causes us to look up and find life from the midst of disease.

O how we need that same Spirit of Jesus now in the midst of our global crisis.

To have our eyes lifted up and find life on the other side of that which has caused us trouble.

All of us once lived in disobedience but by grace are saved out of the great love which God has for us (Ephesians 2:4).

In John's Gospel, chapter 3, Jesus makes a direct comparison with the ancient story of the bronze serpent in the desert and his own being lifted up on a cross as the means to discover life, as the way out, the rescue, the healing, the cure.

Christ crucified is now the thing to gaze upon that will resurrect the spirits of sinful people.

'Look up and live'. And everyone who does so may have eternal life in him.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. (John 3:16-17).

To look up and see Christ crucified is to see the immensity of Divine Love at work in the midst of a far from perfect world and to hear Christ beckon us in his way of making all things new.

To look up means to begin to accept that our sins are forgiven, our past is healed and our future is assured, even though the road to the promised land ahead is likely still to be full of bumps and pot holes.

To look up means to keep going, to be honest about our failures, to own up to our shortcomings yet to know that with the Spirit of Christ we can do things differently, and we can discover a reason for living.

We can look up and see because the light has come into the world to light up the way ahead and to assure us that the cross is the way to the Promised Land.

I wonder what life you see when you look up.

There were two stories that struck me in the past two weeks. You may have seen them on TV or in the news.

They were stories of looking up in hope in the midst of trouble.

The first was in a BBC documentary by Orla Geuring about a 9 year old blind Yemeni boy called Ahmed - substitute teacher who dreams of a day when their bomb shell of a school may have a roof and windows.

And the second story was very similar. It was a young Afghan woman called Sara Barackzay who said this, "I dream of making the future easier for at least some girls in Afghanistan, and of joining Disney or Pixar as an animation artist one day. But my number one dream remains for my country: lasting peace."

They both looked up and saw a better world inspired by the Spirit of God. Their spirits have been awakened.

What might we see when we look up?

How might we hasten the coming of the Promised Land in our world?

And pray for its coming?

Blessing:

Let us all go in peace,
with our eyes
and our hearts
focussed on the love of God,
the grace of our Lord Jesus
and the communion of the Holy Spirit,
today, tomorrow and always.