St Peter the Fisherman – Whitianga
Sunday March 10th 2024

Theme: (The extent of God’s love )

I runga i te ingoa o te papa, te tama, me te wairua tapu.

*In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.*

*Amen*

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For a change, there are some very interesting links between all our readings today. Especially given the fact God chose a snake, with its association back to Adam and Eve, and a symbol of great harm, to be the opportunity for a chance at redemption in our OT reading and is directly referred to by Jesus in our Gospel text. A real moment of “Do you now get the message?”

The extent of God’s love, in spite of ourselves, and how we just continually get it wrong when asked to trust in God, who is always there for us – even when we seriously don’t deserve it. Not only that, but sometimes the most unlikely of means is provided to help us heal and move on from the damaged state we are in.

The central verse in this passage is perhaps the best known Bible verse in the Christian world, and is also the central message of our faith.

(verse 16)

We hang on to this whenever we need to be reassured God not only loves us but what he did to prove it – so we could be confident of his enduring love for us, through good and bad times, in the hope we will be a bit better than the Israelites in trusting him.

The passage begins with a play on the words “lift up.” It describes God’s original command to Moses to lift up the serpent in the wilderness and the lifting up that is in store for Jesus. The passage makes little sense without the background story from Numbers 21:4-9. In that narrative, the people became “impatient” on their way. Still in the wilderness after their departure from Egypt and despairing of being able to survive in a land with no food and water, they complained against God and Moses. They did a lot of that, but I suppose 40 years and no promised land thus far, does rather stretch ones fortitude and faith.

(Moses and the snake)

So, consequently, terrible serpents appeared, bit the people, and killed them. When they finally figured out they were being punished for their latest demonstration of doubt, and appropriately, repented, the Lord told Moses to make a serpent and set it on a pole so that anyone who had been bitten might look at it and live. The serpent was a mark of both God’s anger and God’s mercy. God’s people might be saved by the God of life, if only they would look upon the image of that which would have brought about their death. We will be saved if only we would look on Jesus resurrected and believe in him.

A side issue but of interest to us all in another context.

(Esclepius and the snake symbol)

The snake figure was originally associated with Asclepius, the ancient Greek God of medicine, and possessed benevolent properties. It was believed to be able to cure a patient or a wounded person just by touch. So very like the bronze snake Moses produced. Did the Greeks and Israelites have any contact back in Moses’ time? Who knows? But interesting none the less.

The snake is also connected with pharmacology and antisepsis, as snakes possess an antivenom against their own poison. Thus, it has long been a symbol of medicine and the medical profession.

The narrative of the snakes in our OT text relates to all those stories of complaining and rebellion. This time, however, the people speak out not only against Moses but against God as well. There is no water, and the manna which God has provided for them is, as the people say, “miserable.” Earlier the people looked back with rose-coloured glasses at the abundant foods they left behind in Egypt (fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, garlic!); now they’re stuck with food that tastes like “cakes baked with oil” and they have had enough.

That is also noted in our Psalm,

(Psalm verses 17 to 19)

where the psalmist tells of the time when the wandering Israelites were really struggling; but when, at their lowest ebb they did turn to God and cried out, God saved them from their distress.

Then Paul makes a clear referral to this love in his letter to the Ephesians.

(Ephesians verses 4 to7)

God raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places with Christ.

God’s action was not disinterested. The purpose of God’s having sent his Son was to save the world, just as the purpose of commanding Moses to erect a serpent on a pole was to save the people from death. God’s son came to save, to grant eternal life because God loved the world, the whole world. That was Jesus’ announcement. I’m here because the God who loved you of old, still does. He sent me to tell you, to show you, to gather you up into life with him forever.

Jesus’ coming is like the bringing of a light into a dark space. The contrast of light and dark is intense. Indeed, the coming of the Son into the world leads to numerous pairs of contrasting realities:

(contrasts)

* condemn or save
* believe or not believe
* stay in the darkness or come into the light
* doing evil or doing what is true.

These opposites express the sharp distinction that is created when our dark world is entered by the light of God. Like the people in the story in Numbers, we have already been bitten or are in imminent danger of being bitten. Death is thus inevitable.

(Moses and the snake, plus Jesus on the cross)

However, when the bronze serpent is brought into the world, we look and live, or we do not. As Jesus comes into the world, we trust that which bears God’s gracious love, or we do not. We receive eternal life, or we continue to live apart from God, condemned.

God’s way of loving the world was to send his Son to save it. Jesus is God’s expression of love and longing. The light comes to find us, to illuminate our path for our sake, because God wants us. God reaches out through his Son with the sheer purpose of sharing everlasting life with us.

Yes, John tells us there are real consequences in our daily life and our everlasting relationship with God. But he tells us in order to help us see the contrasts, we should look clearly at our lives, appreciate the gracious gift of God as a gift of love, and live in confidence of that love.

Well, it wouldn’t be me and a sermon about love and not bring in The Beatles – but not, this time, All You Need is Love! Sounds a bit like what God might be saying to us, in a sort of weird way.

(Love me do)

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Have we ever been so truly and consistently desired by another as we are by God? No indeed. God loved our world in all its frailties, missteps and flaws, so much, that he gave his Son as the demonstrated proof of that, so that if we **choose** to believe, we might live forever with God.

Amen