

So, what about us?

Years back when I was involved in the Youth Department of the World Council of Churches, I attended a meeting in what is now Chennai (back then it was known as Madras). And one morning quite early (before it got too hot) we visited a Research Project: a crocodile park -I'd never seen so many, all resting in the sun, by their different pools. They couldn't have cared less about us, and for us it was an amazing sight. Then we went on to the serpentarium, and that still gives me the shivers. So many snakes, in so many different setup places for them, often all tangled together. Talk about a horror movie! And I remember a hot summer day at the Iguazu Falls, cooling my feet by a stream, and suddenly discovering a beautiful little coral snake coming towards me – no problem, my feet were out of that stream in a flash!

If you have read the Bible passages for today, you will realize why I have just referred my encounter with serpents; each time I go back to these readings, I can't but "see" all those snakes again, and I can't even imagine what it must have been like to have witnessed what we are told in the passage from Numbers. There is one thing for sure, both these Bible readings aren't here only to give us the shivers, they are also there to remind us something so very important to our faith, and that is that God's plan is one of salvation, and God will go to great lengths to achieve that, so what about us, where are we in our life with God's plans?

These readings clearly speak to us of a "journey", which is something we have been talking about during this time of Lent. A journey from peril to safety, from fear to trust, from uncertainty to confidence. And along that journey we will all be able to find something that will help us keep going on our own journey at this time.

The reading from Numbers happens on the journey to the promised land, a desert trail, and there aren't many animals in the desert, but the ones found are hard animals adapted to such a hostile environment, and one you could expect snakes around. The people seem to be fed up, and moan out loud, not only against Moses (as has been the case so often in the past), but this time against God as well (which is quite unusual) the Bible passage tells that they have become impatient, and this impatience is expressed out loud: "what are you two doing with us? Why have you brought us here to die?" they even have an issue about the terrible menu! Their impatience is based on their feelings, not on God's plan, and there I believe, is the central issue of the whole narrative – not only this passage, but so much of the Biblical narrative.

The people have forgotten how they cried out in slavery and how God came down to liberate them, they have gone from gratefulness to resentment. *That is the sin*. And then the serpents appear, and they cry out to God: "we have sinned by speaking against the Lord and Moses" so Moses prays FOR the people and God intervenes, telling Moses to create a bronze serpent and when people who have been bitten look at it, they will live. Interestingly the reading does not say that the snakes will disappear -they are desert creatures, this is their habitat-, the reading says: "*whenever a serpent bites someone, if they look at the bronze serpent they will live*".

I invite you now to re-read the Gospel text. Often this is a reading cut up in portions by which we run the risk of losing the full sense of it. The Lectionary has the reading starting at verse 14, which is a

reference to the bronze serpent we read in Numbers, but you can't start a reading in the middle of a paragraph. This is part of the story of Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night, and then develops into a lesson on God's plan, a plan of salvation not of condemnation.

Jesus talks about his own journey by which he will be lifted up into heaven, and like the bronze serpent, this is for life. It is an act of grace, which is the generous giving by God, not a result of our own actions. And if we need reminding of this, please read verses **16 AND 17**. They should not be split. God's love by which the Son came to the world not to condemn but to save. The whole reading is one of hope and salvation, made visible in God's forgiving actions, even when we have become self-centred, we can find hope, forgiveness, restoration. There is always a possibility of "turning around". Remember - "the Son of Man has to be lifted up, as Moses lifted the bronze serpent": what seems to be the cause of death (the cross, the serpent) is what God presents to us as possibilities of life. Serpents will continue to exist, death will continue to exist, and yet the sting of serpents and the sting of death are conquered. What does that say to us today?

And so here we come to the BIG question: **what about us?** On our own journey in life, how have we lived our relationship with God and with each other, with creation? Let us ponder verses 19-21. Once again, we come across the image of light and darkness, and this is so clear in the times we live. We have mentioned it each Reflection of this Lent time; I referred to this last week, so you can go back to that list. All forms of evil hate light, while truth brings us into the light. This judgement (the Greek word here is *krisis*) is an ongoing one, ongoing in the sense that it gives us the chance to change, to correct ways, to seek truth and come into the light, rather than do evil and remain in the dark. Form a *krisis* we learn, and we change and take forward what we have learnt.

God's plan for our lives has always been of new possibilities, be it in the walk through the desert, be it seeking a new sense of life, be it this time of Covid, be it our seeking a sense of fullness, be it determining how we will live our faith after Covid. Have we been closed to the generosity of God's love for the world? Even if there are still serpents while we are on the journey, God has shown us God cares, and will be the cause and reason of our hope.

So yes, it's not just looking back to the desert, or even to Jesus speaking to the people then, it is about us here and now, recognising our mistakes, trying to be more loving, seeking to live in hope, believing that God cares and will provide us with new ways to live in fullness during this journey we are one.

Collect for the fourth Sunday in Lent

God, rich in mercy, whose light reveals the truth of things, the judgement we bring on ourselves: we thank you that you sent your Son to save and not condemn; in his self-giving love may life abundant reign; through Jesus Christ, who was lifted for us. Amen

(Prayers for an inclusive church)

Join Zoom meeting

Tuesday 16th at 4:00 pm (note the change of time)

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/89472784591?pwd=Rnl5ei9wWlMyNXhmTmFsU1V0enF6Zz09>

Meeting ID: 894 7278 4591

Passcode: 241791