Lent 4B 2021 God’s greatest gift in His Son lifted up on a cross

Numbers 21: 4 – 9 John 3: 14 - 21

God’s gifts spurned by His people

The Israelites were sprung from Egypt by the saving deeds of God alone. No one could claim responsibility for the 10 wonders and the parting of the Red Sea, not even Moses. So, God alone was their Rescuer.

When they were in the desert, it was God who now provided water and bread for them. No one could claim that they were keeping themselves alive. For God was teaching and reassuring his people to trust in Him for daily bread in the wilderness.

But along the way, their patience was lost. They complained against God for rescuing them and they despised the bread from heaven. It was said that the manna or bread from heaven tasted sweet yet the hearts of Israel was bitter toward God who gave his people all these gifts.

God’s gift of healing by looking up at the serpent

Then God sent fiery serpents. Snakes came slithering into camp and bit the people. Many died. Those still alive, repentant of their sin, appealed to Moses who prayed for them. God heard his prayer and instructed Moses to make a snake of bronze and set it up on a pole and whoever was bitten by a deadly snake, should look on the lifted-up snake and then would live.

The Son lifted up in the midst of all who are already under judgment

The comparison of Jesus with the bronze serpent is made when he is lifted up on the cross. When we hear of lifting up Jesus we think of Him being lifted up into heaven at His Ascension. In this sense lifting up is said to be exalting. For example, Jesus is exalted at the right hand of His father.

It is possible to exalt Jesus by honouring him in life and so lifting him up by praising him. But for John the evangelist, the lifting up of Jesus happens only on the cross. In the Gospel of John, the crucifixion is not the first step on the way to glory nor in any way a transition to glory. The lifting up of Jesus on the cross is His glory and exaltation in John’s gospel.

So, for John, the cross of Jesus is his throne of glory and majesty. That is, in the cross itself the Son of Man now sits on the throne of Majesty at God’s right hand. His rule is from the cross and is characterized by the cross.

This is a different understanding of glory and power than we have. We think of the winner as the one who has beaten the opponent and now stands over him. In the way of Jesus, He is the conqueror in the moment he is lifted up on the cross and dies in humility and apparent defeat.

The first serpent brought the fall of humanity

It may become clearer when we remember how the death of Christ was first promised. It came as a result of the first serpent who slithered down a tree and spoke poisonous words to Eve. Instead of listening to God or rejoicing in all the wonderful gifts that God had given in paradise, she wanted one more fruit, she wanted to become wise and independent of God who was providing for her and Adam in abundance.

In this way the first serpent brought down all humanity. All stand condemned. There is not one who is righteous and there is no one who can save themselves. So God promises a son born of a woman who would crush the serpent’s head and so end the hostility between man and God.

Although the seed of the woman would accomplish this, the serpent would bite the heel of the man. That means he would die, yet in death has gained the victory for all. So now

The Son saves all who believe in Him.

The death of Christ is now his greatest glory and is our salvation. For all who look upon him being lifted up on the cross, receive healing from the bite of the first serpent, that is eternal death.

When the Lord Jesus compares the lifting up of the bronze serpent with him being lifted up on a cross, he wished to be properly figured by that bronze serpent that God had commanded. As the bronze serpent was like the fiery serpents but without the harmful poison, so also our Saviour looked like a criminal being crucified between two of them, and so looked like a sinner yet had no sin of his own.

Jesus appeared in the likeness of the flesh of sin in order to condemn sin in the flesh for us and save us. (Romans 8:3) When an Israelite looked upon the bronze snake, he lived and was freed from the deadly bite. So also, whoever believes in Jesus the crucified is not condemned.

However, if an Israelite refused to look upon the bronze serpent that Moses lifted up, he would have remained under the judgment of the deadly bite and the death that followed. In that way, whoever does not believe is condemned already, since he steadfastly refuses to believe in the Son of God. (John 3:18)

Apart from the Crucified One there is no salvation or eternal life.

Who can rescue themselves from the slavery to sin and the inevitability of death? What medicine is available that could give eternal life? But those who believe in Christ Jesus, are not condemned but are now already beyond condemnation and enjoy eternal life.

Eternal life does not replace our life now but is God’s greatest gift to us. This gift of eternal life is yours now in His Son. No need to wait for it you are already in it. God grant you patience in your walking in this world’s wilderness so that you continue to look upon Christ crucified for you!