

Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> March 2018

**Lent 4**

**Purple**



### **Collect**

Merciful Lord, absolve your people from their offences, that through your bountiful goodness we may all be delivered from the chains of those sins which by our frailty we have committed; grant this, heavenly Father, for Jesus Christ's sake, our blessed Lord and Saviour, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen**

**Numbers 21:4-9** English Standard Version (ESV)

### **The Bronze Serpent**

21<sup>4</sup> From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way.<sup>5</sup> And the people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.”<sup>6</sup> Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died.<sup>7</sup> And the people came to Moses and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people.<sup>8</sup> And the LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.”<sup>9</sup> So Moses made a bronze<sup>[a]</sup> serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

**Footnote:** a. or *copper*.

**COMMENT:** The name of the book in English derives from the Greek title ‘Arithmoi’ and arises from several passages referring to the numbers counted in a census of Israel. The Hebrew name is ‘bemidbar’ meaning ‘in the wilderness.’ The whole book tells of Moses’ leadership of the Israelites during their time in the wilderness under the LORD’s direction. While exhibiting this thematic unity, the text also reveals some evidence of various sources. Primarily, the final edit appears to come from the Priestly compilers of the post-exilic text whose main purpose was to give identity to the LORD’s covenant people, Israel. The value of Numbers lies in the way it tells the descendants of the ancient Israelites who they are from a theological point of view. The incident recorded in this reading was intended to reinforce the idea that the LORD alone, not an object of superstition, was guiding the Israelites toward the Promised Land. Despite being bitten by poisonous snakes, reputedly sent by the LORD as a punishment for rejecting the

LORD's direction through Moses (verses 6-7), the story has a theological meaning that the LORD protects the Israelites from harm. The erection of the bronzed serpent seems very unusual in the light of the second commandment forbidding images of any kind (cf. Exodus 20:4-6). Yet the Israelite's were required only to look at it, and not worship it. Quite obviously, the symbol remained significant for the Jewish faith tradition for many centuries afterward because John 3:14 quotes Jesus as referring to it. The bronzed serpent on a pole remains a symbol of healing for the medical profession.

## **John 3:13-17** English Standard Version (ESV)

### **Son of Man must be lifted up**

3<sup>14</sup> And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,<sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.<sup>[a]</sup>

### **For God So Loved the World**

<sup>16</sup>”For God so loved the world,<sup>[b]</sup> that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup>For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. <sup>18</sup>Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. <sup>19</sup>And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. <sup>20</sup>For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. <sup>21</sup>But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”

**Footnotes:** a. Some interpreters hold that the quotation ends at verse 15. c. or *For this is how God loved the world.*

**COMMENT:** John recorded a persistent tradition that Nicodemus was a secret follower of Jesus (Not only in the present passage but in John 19:38). In this interlocution with Nicodemus, he represented the whole Jewish nation blind to the truth. Yet in coming to Jesus secretly seeking a deeper understanding of who Jesus really is, he also represented certain of the Pharisees who did not oppose Jesus' unique ministry and teaching. Apparently a very wealthy man as well as a member of the supreme court of Israel, the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus later participated in Jesus' burial by bringing a great supply of spices to prevent the body from causing offensive odors while decaying. Thus, like all the rest of the disciples, he did not believe in or anticipate the resurrection. As a Pharisee, nonetheless, he would have believed in resurrection as a messianic event. Again, this points to John's theme that the fundamental issue Jesus' presence raised: Who is he? The context of this reading proclaims that faith in Jesus Christ, the one who was crucified, brings new life. This life is spiritual rather than merely physical. It begins here and now, in this world; but it is also eternal, extending to life with God beyond death. Judgment occurs not at some heavenly court assize which decides between a lifetime of good and evil behavior, but here and now in the way we respond or reject the life offered to us through Jesus Christ. The reference to Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness

(Numbers 21:4-9) symbolised the healing that faith brings. Again, this is not a physical but a spiritual healing. Similarly, the new birth of John 3:3-8 is a spiritual re-creation initiated by the Spirit. John3:16 also re-iterates the reality of the new spiritual life to be received through faith in what God has done in Jesus Christ. As John states unequivocally, judgment has a prominent place in whatever response we make to the proclamation of the gospel. Our decision becomes our judgment. Light and darkness play a significant part in Johannine thinking. This carries over into the first of the Letters of John (1:5-2:29) which has caused scholars to associate the author of the Gospel and the Letters in various if ultimately indefinable ways. The same metaphor also received considerable emphasis in the writings of the Essene sect of Qumran. In this instance, judgment consists of refusing to respond to “the light” that Jesus Christ brings to the world. Later, John’s narrative (9:1-41) reiterates this same metaphor with considerable force regarding the man born blind whom Jesus healed and the Jewish authorities who challenged him. The ultimate question to which each person must respond is: Have you seen the Light? As verse 21 puts it, not our words, but our actions will be our answer.

### **Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22** *Confitemini Domino* Grail Psalter

**R O give thanks to the Lord for he is good, for his love had no end.**

<sup>1</sup> “O give thanks to the Lord for he is good;  
for his love endures for ever.” R

<sup>2</sup> Let them say this, the Lord’s redeemed,  
whom he redeemed from the hand of the foe  
<sup>3</sup> and gathered from far-off lands,  
from east and west, north and south. R

<sup>17</sup> Some were sick on account of their sins  
and afflicted on account of their guilt.

<sup>18</sup> They had a loathing for every food;  
they came close to the gates of death. R

<sup>19</sup> Then they cried to the Lord in their need  
and he rescued them from their distress.

<sup>20</sup> He sent forth his word to heal them  
and saved their life from the grave. R

<sup>21</sup> Let them thank the Lord for his love,  
for the wonders he does for men.

<sup>22</sup> Let them offer a sacrifice of thanks  
and tell of his deeds with rejoicing. R

**Glory be to the Father and to the Son  
and to the Holy Spirit,  
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,  
world without end. Amen.**

**COMMENT:** This beautiful litany of thanksgiving celebrates several instances when faith was tested and God's redemptive grace relieved distressed souls. After the opening summons to praise; verses 1-3, the particular segment contained in verses 17-22 focuses on the healing of a serious illness. As a whole, the psalm recalls incidents of Israel's sojourn in the wilderness. One exception appears to be in verses 23-32 referring to a sea voyage on stormy waters. Was this linked in some way to the parable of Jonah? Some scholars regard it as an addition from the Hellenistic period (after 330 BC) when sea-borne commerce had become common. Verse 3 refers directly to the widespread Diaspora of Israel which also indicates a relatively late date for the composition of the psalm. Structurally, the psalm may or may not have been a unity. The antiphonal responses of verse 8, 15, 21 and 31 give evidence of it having been composed for congregational worship, possibly at the time when sacrifices were offered in the temple. Of particular significance is the prophetic sense of social justice that permeates the psalm. This emphasis recalls Isaiah 61:1-4. Verses 17-22 contains a very traditional view that sin causes sickness. That view still pervades many of the prayers people offer when unforeseen illness strikes. Within limits, however, there is some truth to this point of view. Many people in rich nations are obese or diseased from excessive consumption of unhealthy foods. By contrast in poor countries where food is scarce, has little variety and provides poor nourishment many are nearly starving. In such instances, the Hebrew text *fools* instead of the English *sick* in verse 17 is thus quite appropriate. The point these verses make, however, is that whatever the cause, the LORD is the gracious healer of the sick. Healing manifests Yahweh's steadfast love and for this the faithful are summoned to praise, make thank offerings and recount Yahweh's great acts of mercy in joyful songs. This psalm is one of those songs.

### **Short Preface**

And now we give you thanks because you give us the spirit of discipline, that we may triumph over evil and grow in grace, as we prepare to celebrate the paschal mystery with mind and heart renewed.

### **Post Communion**

Lord God, whose blessed Son our Saviour gave his back to the smiters and did not hide his face from shame: give us grace to endure the sufferings of this present time with sure confidence in the glory that shall be revealed; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

### **Blessing**

Christ give you grace to grow in holiness, to deny yourselves, take up your cross, and follow him; and the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be among you, and remain with you always. **Amen.**