

Sermon

Numbers 21:4-9
Psalm 107:1-3,17-22
Ephesians 2:1-10
John 3:14-21

The scriptures today hold before us the image of Christ being lifted up on the cross for our salvation. Moses lifted up a bronze serpent on a pole and when the people saw it, they were saved. Jesus takes this image and applies it to himself, saying that when he is similarly lifted up on the cross, he will bring about the redemption of the world.

The question is, “How does this happen?” Have you ever wondered how it is that the cross saves us? Have you tried to make sense of that question and put it an answer into words? Give it a try and if you are like me you will begin to see how hard it is to describe in words how something as terrible as the cross saves. People have written whole books on the subject, much ink has been spilled. The curious thing is that the church has never actually defined the “how” of the cross. Later this morning we will say the creed together. The creeds of our faith have much to say about God, the person of God the Father, the person of Jesus and then the Holy Spirit. But you might notice

that the Creeds never say how the cross saves. They simply state that Jesus came “for us and for our salvation” and leave it at that. So what is the meaning of the cross?

The best way to in to this is through stories. We note first that God “so loved the world”, that “God did not send the Son to condemn the world”. Never fall into the trap of thinking the cross is about Jesus being punished to placate an angry God; that God needed someone’s blood to pay for our sin. That is a minority strand in the Christian tradition and is in complete contrast to our reading, “God so loved the world” and “God sis not send the Son to condemn...” Jesus never said he came to placate an angry God the Father, that he was taking a punishment we deserved.

When you get home, you might like to read the whole of John 3. In that chapter Jesus talks about a second birth, being born again. From the beginning, the church interpreted this second birth to be baptism. Baptism is our pathway through the Red Sea into the Promised Land which in Christ is eternal life. We go through that journey again and again every Easter when we celebrate Christ’s passing over from death to life. At the Easter vigil we return to the font, our spiritual birthplace, and renew

our baptismal promises. Jesus' death is the absorption of the forces of evil, the shattering of the frontier between life and death, the opening for us of a way to God.

The story in John's gospel that I think shows the cross in all its splendour is the story of the woman caught in adultery. You will recall that the woman faced death at the hands of the mob and the religious leaders. The religious leaders demanded that Jesus give the order for her death to prove his fidelity to the Law of Moses. Instead, at great risk to himself, Jesus steps in on behalf of the woman and risks being stoned to death himself. You will recall that he challenges one of them to cast the first stone and the crowd, one by one, slink away. The reason they all slink away is that the Romans had a watch tower looking over the temple precinct. Anyone who threw the first stone would be a marked person; everyone would be able to identify who it was and so he/she would easily be rounded up to face the consequences of starting a riot causing death. So when all the people have all gone, the woman sees that Jesus has saved her life. She sees that Jesus has done this at great risk to his own life and at great cost to himself. She knows that he has faced down the religious leaders on their home turf. They will be smarting, and will come back later with bigger sticks with which to strike

Jesus. What the woman experiences in Jesus is a demonstration of God's costly love. This is what the cross is all about. When Jesus is lifted up, we see the extent of God's costly love. We see in Jesus a God who is willing to take big risks in loving the world, a God who comes to absorb evil and violence so that we might be freed from its grip. All we have to do is receive that love. In your prayer, allow Jesus to love you. In your daily living, pass on that costly love especially to the people you struggle to love so that others will see God's love in you.

Having commented on the readings I now want to move on to another subject: to a celebration of our gifts and ministries. How many people here are baptised? (Most hands should be up!) How many people here are ministers? (Hands of the baptised should stay up!)

The teaching of our church is that every one of us is a minister of the gospel by virtue of our baptism. That means that God gives each and every one of us gifts and talents with which to serve God. What we are looking to do today is to name and affirm the gifts of everyone here. It may be that you are a tradesman, a plumber or electrician, or a builder. You might be generous in sharing your skills with others. But also you might

have other gifts to offer God and our community; the opportunity to start your own business and to be the ethical employer and the next honest business around town. If you are an adult with a job, think about how your work can be a ministry, something you do for God as well as your employer or your customers.

The point is that ministry is not something that happens in church on Sunday. Neither do you have to be ordained or a professional Christian to be a minister. Ministry takes place in the places we find ourselves at home, work and play. As members of the church, everything we do we do for God's glory and to cooperate with God's purposes.

So you might be a young person at school. Your gifts might include the way you help others with their home work, or include others in your play so that they are not left alone. You might be a young musician and learn an instrument for God, or good at sport or whatever. If you are a young person, ask God to show you what he would like you to do for him.

Some people here are getting old. Some elderly people begin to think they are no use anymore. That, by the way, is never true.

God always has a vocation for us. God is always able to work in us and through us at every stage of our lives. Maybe you are a mentor younger people, a friend or a wise listening ear. Maybe you've got time to read the papers and write stirring letters to politicians and powerbrokers. Maybe you are the one with time for a special ministry of intercessory prayer; or you visit people in rest homes or take meals on wheels.

The point is: all of us have gifts and talents given us by God. Today we gather to thank God for our gifts, and I ask you to name one or two. Please take a moment to write down on a "leaf" what you believe your gift or your ministry is. At the offertory we will all come forward and place them on a tree provided, and offer them in thanksgiving to God. As we go from here today, take time to talk with God about your gifts and let God show you how to use them day by day.