

## SERMON AT GELORUP: 14:3:2021: LENT 4a: GEOFF CHADWICK

### MIXED METAPHORS AND THE SERPENT ON A POLE

#### Numbers 21.4-9

<sup>4</sup> From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way.<sup>5</sup> 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 detest this miserable food.'<sup>6</sup> Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died.<sup>7</sup> The people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.'<sup>8</sup> So Moses prayed for the people.<sup>8</sup> And the Lord said to Moses, 'Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.'<sup>9</sup> So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

#### Gospel

#### John 3.14-21

<sup>14</sup> And just 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>16</sup> 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. <sup>17</sup> 'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. <sup>18</sup> Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. <sup>19</sup> And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup> For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. <sup>21</sup> But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.'

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Mixed metaphors.

One of the rare things I remember my Year 12 English teacher saying was "*Don't mix your metaphors.*" It's strange that I remember this, because I was one of one of those science-centric 17 year-old males who did not see the value of studying English. I suddenly realised the error of my thinking about 2 weeks before the final exams! Frustratingly (for the teacher), I told the teacher I would not read novels because they were "*Made up stories and had nothing to do with real life.*" Oh, but there was an exception—science fiction because it had the potential to come true one day! Unfortunately there were no Science-Fiction questions on the TAE English paper that year. Actually, the questions were all about love – and my

50.01% result only served to show that I was yet to have my heart broken! “What were all those soppy passages about anyway!” I think the creative essay I wrote describing *The Rules of Cricket to Imaginary Aliens* saved me from total disaster! Either that or I had a loving marker! O! if my English teacher could see me now! I digress!

So what’s a mixed metaphor anyway? (Yes I thought I should check this just in case I’ve forgotten since Y12!)

According to the online Merriam-Webster dictionary a metaphor is:

*a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness ...*

<https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=metaphore+definition&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8>

And a mixed metaphor is *a combination of two or more incompatible metaphors (e.g. this tower of strength will forge ahead).*

<https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=mixed+metaphor+definition&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8>

Now it seems that some of the biblical writers missed my teacher’s lesson. (I’m glad I didn’t tell her that there were mixed metaphors in the bible so they must be OK!) It would make an interesting Bible study to go searching for as many mixed metaphors as we could in the biblical text. It would be a *Herculean task of biblical proportions!*

Today, John has taken an ancient biblical metaphor and flavoured it with New Testament thinking.

He recalls Jesus saying that:

*<sup>14</sup> And just 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. (Jn 3:14, NRSV).*

The Son of Man must be “*lifted up in the wilderness*” just as “*Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness*”. Jn is using known old ideas about Moses to describe a new idea about Jesus.

You will know many of these ideas.

- In Numbers 21 there is the story of the whining wanderers being bitten by snakes:

*<sup>6</sup>Then the Lord sent poisonous\* serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. <sup>7</sup>The people came to Moses and said, ‘We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.’ So Moses prayed for the people. <sup>8</sup>And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Make a poisonous\* serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.’ <sup>9</sup>So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.*

- Later in 2 Kings 18:4: We are told that good king “[Hezekiah]broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it; it was called Nehushtan.” (2Kin 18:4, NRSV)

The destruction of the bronze Nehushtan was considered a good thing because the people had begun to worship the snake rather than the makers of snakes (ie The LORD).

- The image of a serpent on a stick is very ancient. The Greeks associated it with [Asclepius](#), the deity of healing and medicinal arts. But why a snake?
- There are at least two explanations.
  - 1) Snake venom could be used as a medicine. Being poisonous it was thought that it would kill whatever was causing you ailment. Curiously that’s the origin of the word pharmacy, which comes from the Greek *pharmakon*, meaning “*drug*”, “*medicine*”, and “*poison*”.

- Unfortunately, I have no statistic on the success rate of this method – perhaps any medicos present will know more than me?
- 2) Snakes, upon losing their skin emerge as a renewed creature. It was seen as a form or resurrection, or at least renewal. Fittingly, following this idea, snake and snakeskin potions were concocted with the promise of healing. Isn't it funny that we still call medial charlatans “snake oil sellers”?
- There's another possibility that the snake on an a pole represents an ancient technique for treating of “*dracunculiasis*, the *Guinea worm* disease.<sup>[14]</sup> *The worm emerges from painful ulcerous blisters.... The worm senses the temperature change and discharges its larvae into the water. The traditional treatment was to slowly pull the worm out of the wound over a period of hours to weeks and wind it around a stick.*<sup>[14][15]</sup> *The modern treatment may replace the stick with a piece of sterile gauze, but is otherwise largely identical.*<sup>[16]</sup>” ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rod\\_of\\_Asclepius](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rod_of_Asclepius))
  - Poles also have meaning as walking sticks. In the wilderness, a walking pole would be useful. Even today walking poles are used to assist hikers buy supporting their weight or giving stability. Walking sticks have long be used to assist the frail. And here is mine! During my visit to Kenya when I was sick, the senior members of a parish gave me a walking stick as a symbol of their support!

So, if a serpent is a metaphor of healing; and walking pole is a metaphor of healing; why not mix them! *Yes, let's mix our metaphors and put a serpent on a pole! That's bound to powerful!*

*“Now if that's not powerful enough, let's put a crucified Jesus on a pole and lift him up for the world to see?”*

That's exactly what John has done. Using Jesus' words he's making a powerful statement to both the Greeks and the Jews: He's putting it a bit like this:

*“You Greeks are used to seeing Asclepius' serpentine pole. And you Jews are very familiar with Moses' bronze serpent. But here's something else: a man on a pole. But not just any man, this is none other than the Son of God. The healer himself is on the pole. The healer himself will bring renewal. The healer himself is raised in the wilderness of our lives.”*

It's a shocking metaphor really – and John knows that. The Romans had lined the Apian way with hundreds of crucified corpses in order to strike fear in any who might want to oppose them. The Jews, familiar with their scriptures, would have known too well the verse that reads *“anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse”* (Deut 21:23, NRSV). To them a crucified God was theological nonsense.

But this is John, the master evangelist, the master word-smith at work with the master ideas of the time. He mixes his metaphor, not just to be clever, but to proclaim the gospel of all time with the most famous verse of all time:

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (Jn3:16, NRSV).*

Or in the modern idiom:

*“Now listen here, you've all been barking up the wrong pole. Forget about Asclepius, forget about Nehushtan. Look at Jesus instead. He is the true healer – not the snake-oil seller or even the snake. He is the bearer of all our wounds. And we know because his origin is in the LORD who loves the world. This man, on that pole is God's love. It's as simple as that. Believe it and you will find eternal life.*

The Lord be with you.

**And also with you.**