

Sermon at Hannover International Worship March 17th 2019

2nd Sunday of Lent / Reminiscere

Numbers 21, 1 – 11 and John 3, 14 – 21

*Remember, Lord, your great mercy and love,
for they are from of old.*

This verse from Ps 25,6 gave this Sunday its name: Reminiscere. - Remember, Lord!

Reminiscing, remembering - Memories can be powerful. They can be a good thing when we remember the good times and that keeps us going in the bad times.

Memories can also be false memories. When we glorify the past. When all the bad or ambiguous things disappear from our recollections: when the past becomes one extended honeymoon, where everything was just good and wonderful.

Then memories can become less helpful, even dangerous: as those memories of the good old times can lead to a feeling of despondency - things will never be so good again as they were. And we see a lot of that in public life and politics: especially when we enter „fake news“ territory when people say that everything was better in the past, before industrialization, or in the old federal republic before unification, before the refugees came, before their country joined the European Union... and so on.

And then there can be even a cherishing of memories of bad things. The keeping open of ancient wounds and hurts in order to prevent healing and reconciliation but to sow hatred and death, as we just have witnessed in New Zealand.

False memories, deceptive memories, helpful or unhelpful memories - which are we letting flourish in our lives?

Are they good - or bad?

Do they inspire us to lead a better life?

Or are they causing us to harm ourselves and others?

Last week at coffee after church I asked some of the people if they remembered anything from their time at Sunday school.

The first padre I asked remembered that he had to learn lots of Bible verses and whole paragraphs of Scripture. „Do you remember any of them?“ , I asked. „Yes,“ he said, „John 3.16!“

The other padre I asked had been a Methodist in his youth. He didn't have to learn any verses, but he remembered that they had to sell little picture cards with smiling children from other continents to raise money for mission. It wasn't a memory he really cherished. He was still embarrassed by it. Not a helpful memory.

Our Army Scripture Reader said that he didn't go to Sunday school as a boy but he could still remember a lot of Bible verses and offered to recite the whole letter of Jude (which I declined). He of course also remembered John 3.16 but he said he would always start at verse 14. And wasn't it remarkable that Jesus compares himself to the snake?... - and straight away we were in a theological discussion.

This discussion began of course a long time ago with the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. And I'd like to take you into this conversation today, a little bit of which we heard earlier in the reading.

One can almost hear Jesus saying, „Nicodemus, remember the story of the brazen snake? When Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness?“

And Nicodemus surely would have remembered that strange story from the book of Numbers.

Of course he would have known the book „b'midbar“, „In the wilderness“ - part of the law of Israel, part of the great story of the Israel's exodus from Egypt, the story how they got the law and how they travelled through the desert for forty years with all its ups and downs.

There was definitely no highway in the wilderness at that time for the Israelites. It was difficult. It was lengthy. It was boring. The monotony of the landscape was only topped by the monotony of the food and drink.

The longer it took to reach their destination (and the way seemed to be getting longer and longer) - the longer it took, the more they remembered the good old times...

Their memories focussed on the food (they chose to forget the oppression, the murderous regime of pharaoh, the killing of the babies...)

They remembered the food: „Remember the onions and the garlic, remember the luscious hummus and falafel, we had?

And drink! Not just water and that Manna stuff every day and night!“ „It wasn't all bad - remember all the food we got in Egypt!“

And so they remembered the food, and forgot all that God gave them in the here and now. Some even fondly remembered the funeral arrangements: „Why should we die in the desert? Could we not have graves in Egypt?“

Nicodemus remembered this story well - it was part of that grand narrative that was the foundation of his religion.

Even after God had given them a military victory which cleared another part of the way towards the promised land they started moaning again, as the progress wasn't fast enough.

They became impatient and spoke against Moses and against God:

“Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!”

(Just to remind you: This ‚miserable food‘ being the Heavenly manna of course!)

The people were quickly brought to their senses again by the arrival of venomous snakes:

Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died.

The people rushed to Moses. They recognized their mistakes and with a confession of guilt they ask for Moses' intercession, saying:

“We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us.”

So Moses prayed for the people and became their intercessor.

And God gives a solution: *The Lord said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live."*

Nicodemus may have wondered about this: Why did God not just take the snakes away? And with them the evil that they represented?

Why this strange sculpture? Maybe, he thinks, it would be too easy and the children of Israel would not have learned anything if he had just taken the snakes away? Thus they need to act. They have to look out for the snake; they must see it.

They need to be active, to turn away from their pain, their earthly involvement with the snake, turn away from evil and look up and face towards God.

Like Psalm 121,1-2 Nicodemus thinks: *I lift up my eyes to the mountains— where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.*

Is this how it works? We are forced to look up to God. We are bitten, we have to face it, in the image of the snake but then have to look beyond for help. We have to change our perspective: to God, who is the maker of Heaven and Earth...

And this is how this little story, only one of many along the way from Egypt to the promised land ended: *So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.*

What a strange story, Nicodemus must have thought. How unbiblical, unlawful, even ungodly!

Unlawful, because: How can God instruct Mose to make a bronze snake. Commands him to go against the second commandment: No graven images!

And unbiblical - the whole of Scripture is concerned about the right way of doing worship, where, by whom, places, images etc. - that there is no mixing of God in Heaven and any earthly objects. And here: Not only have we an image of a living creature - but moreover: It was to be venerated, by looking up to it at a time of distress and in search of help from a snake bite.

This is not how God normally works in the Bible!

And finally: of all possible images - God commands Moses to make a snake!

Does He not remember that the snake is a symbol of evil? How the snake in the garden at the beginning was an incarnation of Satan (Gen 3)?

This story, Nicodemus reflects, sits very oddly in the Bible. He is glad that it only happened at the back of beyond, somewhere near Edom, but nowhere near the Holy Land.

It was a piece of very irregular worship.

And Nicodemus also remembered what happened many years later to it: when the good king Hezekiah had it destroyed as he restored best practice in worship: *„He did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, ... He removed the high places, smashed the sacred stones and cut down the Asherah poles. He broke into pieces the bronze snake Moses had made, for up to that time the Israelites had been burning incense to it.“*

Nicodemus reflected: even if it had been made by Moses himself on the instructions of God. It still had no place in the proper worship, because there were no provisions for it in God's laws that laid down the rules for the temple worship. Well done Hezekiah!

But was there a spiritual meaning in this small story that Jesus was reminding him of?

It must be this, Nicodemus may have thought:

God himself provides a means of salvation for his people which, once established they can grasp themselves, with no intercessor or interlocutor, no priest required.

Not something that happens automatically, but in a helpful, spiritual way: that they are reminded to turn away from that which hurts and kills and turn towards Heaven but not just looking away, but facing up to it in the light of Heaven.

And thus putting one's trust alone in God to save one's life.

(Maybe not so unbiblical after all, Nicodemus muses).

With all these thoughts in his head, Nicodemus almost missed the rest of Jesus sentence: Like the snake in the desert -

„so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.“

Now - this is seriously irregular theology! Nicodemus thought. As if the original story wasn't bad enough... What is Jesus talking about?

Is he really saying that?

Is he really comparing himself to the snake, the origin of sin, the image of Satan?

We have to leave Nicodemus here. We don't know what he might have made of this. Will he have understood what Jesus is trying to say here?

May be later, after the crucifixion, he will have remembered this conversation and in the light of the story of the brazen snake he will have understood the life and death of Jesus...

We can try to understand Jesus here. We know the outcome of the story. We know that Jesus died on the cross. We can read all of St John's gospel and understand things better. We know that there is a double meaning in the phrase „lifted up“ as it means both: the literal being lifted up on the cross and the return to the Father in glory..

We also remember St Paul and what he wrote in Romans (Rom 8.3) that God send „*his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh*“ — and suddenly it becomes less strange that Jesus can compare himself to a snake - the origin of sin.

For the Israelites the means of salvation from the snake bites was to look at the likeness of a snake. For us the means of our salvation is to look at Jesus in the likeness of our fallen humanity on the cross. —

We are not bitten by snakes. But we suffer from all the shortcomings of our humanity. All the things which tradition calls sin.

We find that we don't do the things we ought to do, or even the things we want to do. We find ourselves alone and separated from God.

But the remedy is there, before our eyes.

Like the Israelites we must stop looking down staring at the fiery snakes. But we must lift our eyes to see what God has provided for our salvation - and there we are asked to see not just with our eyes but with our hearts - what John calls „believing“.

In Jesus we see God in our form, who shared our life.

On the cross we see that God in Jesus shared all of our life, including our death, our separation, our fear of being alone and without God.

And moreover, we hear of His love for us and for our world:

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

This verse is indeed worthy to be remembered - learned inwardly and outwardly - learned by heart in the literal sense. It is the true essence of what it means to be a Christian.

The love of God - that is both our love for God and God's love for us - the love of God will help us to cope with all the bad and false and unhealthy memories that hurt us and keep us away from life. God will give a healing of those memories.

*Remember, Lord, your great mercy and love,
for they are from of old.*

Amen.

I've been talking a lot about remembering. Something I forgot, when I set out to write this sermon was that it is St Patrick's day today. In his dealing with snakes he has been even more efficient than Moses: legend has it that he stood on a hilltop, waved his staff and forced all the slithering serpents to drown themselves in the sea, thus expelling them singlehandedly from the Emerald Isle for good. So: Happy St Patrick's day to everybody, especially to those in the congregation who recently re-discovered their Irish roots thanks to Brexit.