

Lent 4, March 15th 2015.

Mothering Sunday and Harvest Festival, followed by the AGM.

Numbers 21: 4-9, John 3: 14-21

A prayer together: God, we acknowledge our humanity, for when we are in danger we experience fear; when we are in intimidating places we become anxious; when times are tough our endurance is low and we fall into a culture of complaint. Help us to recognise your loving presence in our lives, to truly see the blessings given to us and to once again choose love over fear, light over darkness and life over death. Amen.

Simnel cake, Harvest loaf, Church AGM meeting, honouring those who nurture us, honouring our church, being thankful. We are spoilt for choice – but we would like you today to choose them all.

I wonder how many of us are wearing a bracelet or some other identification with a serpent on a rod. There are ancient origins for this common symbol.

We can choose how we view the events of life. In the book of Numbers Israel chose to focus on their sense of fear for the future. Moses was older, the souls of the people were much discouraged. They would soon face the end of wandering in the wilderness.

Of course they had been rescued from slavery, had avoided recapture from a powerful army and had been provided with food and water, yet they grumbled about their monotonous diet of manna. Manna is a sticky substance that appears on the Tamarisk tree; it is gathered early in the morning and made into a kind of bread. It is highly nutritious, but rather bland.

The people harboured poisonous thoughts and used biting words.

The ghastly snake bites the community experienced led the people to confess their sin of grumbling and Moses again prayed for mercy for the people.

Moses made the bronze serpent on a pole and any who looked were saved and given new life. A non-canonical book declares that for the one who turned towards it healing and salvation was granted, not by the thing that was beheld, but by God, saviour of all. The bronze snake had no power in itself. 700 years later King Hezekiah destroyed the symbol for people had by then called it 'Nehushtan' and were making offerings to it, worshipping the symbol and not the Saviour.

In Greek history there was the rod of Asclepius, linked with the Hippocratic Oath. The American medical corps has a caduceus symbol with two snakes around a pole and wings.

Why a snake? People had seen snakes wriggling out from their skins and still living. Snakes were seen as experiencing resurrection each time they shed their skin, hence the link with healing and new life.

Jesus must have thought of the incident in the book of Numbers. John's gospel draws a parallel between the lifting of Jesus on the cross and Moses' lifting of the bronze serpent.

Gregory of Nazianzus, an early church Father, suggests contrasting the two. The serpent was a representation of what was bringing death. God's power was able to defeat its poison. Jesus went through death to life to save the world. Those that believe have eternal life; a new quality of life that exists now. Jesus was lifted up to be crucified, raised on the third day, conquering death, living a resurrected life and then ascending. This happened to save the world. We do not look at a snake on a pole. We believe in this powerful outpouring of love in the death of Jesus.

It is suggested that the supreme happiness in life is the conviction that we are loved for ourselves, or even loved in spite of ourselves.

This gives us a quality of life that motivates us to be kind, helpful, caring people, who are thankful. Those who do not believe miss out now because they do not love light and enjoy those qualities.

Several times grieving widows have asked will their loved husbands be okay? Will God accept them?

There is only one man who I have wondered might not be acceptable to God.

Even then I prayed for him that God would save him and redeem him from the awful realities of his life.

Saving means healing, restoration, being made whole.

The season of Lent enables us to look again at the choices we are making; how we respond to who and what is around us.

Like the people of Israel we choose how we view the events of life; how we will respond to people and circumstances. We seek healing and light, courage to face the future and commitment to all that is good.

After the service we will meet for the Annual General Meeting of Parishioners. We will review the year past, assess where we are and make commitments for the future. There's healing and salvation at the heart of Parish life and everyone's presence is important, for your faith contributes to the direction for the future.