

Lent 4: Emergence – the power of symbols

Readings: Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14-21

Prelude - I've been warned by my colleagues in Ministry – *never* preach on Numbers. One colleague described Numbers as the B side of Exodus. It the mystical and magical other side to the story filled with scraps from a variety of sources and literary styles, census information and rules.

So here we go...

Metaphors and symbols are the understory of scripture. While they are not as definable (and agreeable) as translations or history lessons – they are what spoke to the people at the time and speak to us now.

And we may never agree. But that is OK – I will give you two stories and you can choose what speaks to you.

I walked with a patient who was deep in faith but wounded by the church. Her husband, who was a Minister, left her for another and to her surprise, so did the congregation. She expected support but instead was made to feel alone, ostracised... So in her experience, she was abandoned twice. We had hours of discussion around God, faith and spirituality. In fact, she was the one who told me to read *The Shack*.

She was on a long, terminal journey and would come and go from the hospital as she declined, improved a little and declined some more. She was adamant that she wanted me there at the end and that she wanted to be anointed as she passed away. One day, she slipped into a coma and I was called to ICU.

I stood by her bed and said a silent prayer and then I greeted her in the name of Christ. I anointed her head with a balm of healing and calming herbs. I made the sign of a cross on her forehead, prayed for her safe journey and left.

To my surprise, she appeared in the wards a week or two later. When I had left her, she was in a deep coma and not expected to survive the next few hours. So when I saw her sitting up in bed looking perky, I was stunned. She said, I knew you were there! I smelled the balm in my dreams and I held onto that. It carried me through. I felt God's presence and He never left me.' and then she thanked me.

A few months later, she died and she went willingly and in peace.

What was it that she held onto? She found her symbol of hope, companionship and healing. Companionship with the Lord overcame her sense of abandonment. Her 'symbol' was the healing balm – a smell.

In the Numbers story, the symbol of the serpent doesn't stop people from getting bitten just as the balm didn't stop her from dying. The people were required, when bitten, to go to the pole and look up – and remember God. Perhaps they were forced to emerge from their self-pitying and remember whose they were and whom they serve. God does not prevent illness – but offers healing and defence against anguish. No wonder, it became the symbol for the medical profession. They can't stop injury (hence the snake is still there) but they can help heal in their case physically, not spiritually or metaphorically. Dr's have a way of being literal.¹

The snake on a pole prepares us for the power of the cross. And what of these holding crosses we scatter about to the family and patients in need of something to hold onto?

I have had dozens of 'holding' crosses made by men's sheds but discovered many do not fully understand why the shape and feel are important.²

The original was designed so it does not fall out of your hand when you lose consciousness. (whether it is in death or asleep). It is sculpted to the closed palm. It should be smooth and pleasant to touch. It doesn't look like a cross – it *feels* like a cross. It is something to hold onto and know you are not alone. Chaplains don't give out pills – we offer a symbol instead. Not to prevent injury but to smooth the soul.

Look a little more closely at the symbol for medicine and you see there is a non-defined head and wings – which is a direct reference to this passage.

My scholarly colleagues argue that it was not snakes sent to pester the people but Seraphim, as alluded to in the wings at the top of the medical symbol. Seraph is the Hebrew word for burn – Seraphim is the plural. This is supported by the disputed text translation of the adjective 'poisonous' where as the Hebrew word is more like fiery or burning. The whole story is fantastical. It is almost pre-Judean and possibly rests

¹ I wonder whether they even teach where the symbol comes from anymore.

² In pre COVID times, I would invite you up to touch each one and feel the differences.

on myths and legends that predate the Old Testament. Why would God tell Moses to create a bronze idol? And why would he set seraphim on his people like cattle dogs nipping at their heels?

Seraphim are not angels – as we are led to believe by folklore. They are specifically described in many passages always with 6 wings hiding their faces and feet and play many roles. They are often depicted with swords and shields. It was believed they were always burning with a love for God which is a fierceness that you do not find in angels. Were they God's warriors? They are heavenly creatures – supernatural if you like, but they are not necessarily benign: More like the pre-Christian, (Celtic) faeries. That is spelt F-A-E-R-I-E-S not fairies. These are not the little creatures at the bottom of your garden but rather unpredictable, largely untrustworthy creations who can lead people afield – guide or alter ways. Scare them if necessary.

In the story – the Israelites have become quarrelsome. Nostalgia's rain has dampened memory's soil so that what sprung up was a past *so much better* than the present. They forgot oppression and slavery but remembered food, shelter and certainty. In the old days, they knew where they were going to be tomorrow, and the day after that. Quite the opposite to their struggle with scarcity and the elusiveness of the promised Land. They accused God of infidelity and Moses of a failure of leadership.

So the Lord sent in the snakes/seraphim/cattle dogs to bring them to heal. If we work with the metaphor of snakes, snakes represent gossip mongers; rumour spreaders; creators of elitist cliques; and shonky deals. Snakes represent dirty politics and disinformation that can tear a community apart. There is a plague amongst them, be it biting each other or being bitten.

In desperation, they turn to Moses and admit they have sinned and ask Moses to do what Moses does – intervene: To take the snakes away...

And God tells Moses to create this thing (if not an idol, then definitely a symbol) – to put it on a pole, to raise it up, which is where the Gospel of John takes its reference to Jesus on the Cross. (Jn 3:14-21).

There's a point here where the scripture is asking for a transubstantiation. It takes the source of their fear and destruction and transforms it into a magical antidote. If you look to this symbol – you will live.

Was it so we would realise that Jesus had to be raised before we are saved?

Well. That's up to you.

What I will say is that God did not take the snakes away.

Remember, God does not kill the snakes or prevent them from biting people. He does not remove whatever curse was snapping at their heels.

The scripture doesn't say *not* bitten, doesn't say *cured* (of the curse) – just says lived. They were given a way to live with it. Something to hold onto.

Whatever the sign was – it was powerful as the people went from riotous to obedient.

When we are wallowing in the soup of symbolism, the alphabet noodles don't always spell words we understand.

Meaning only emerges – as we sit; examine; re-think and be open to a deeper appreciation. It may emerge in a sense of smell, or an image burned into your consciousness. It may be in a touch or in a touching moment – the spirit moves.

Signs and symbols are a language built into human DNA – understandable at a primitive level – a level before education and before Church as we know it. I like to believe it is skywriting for the soul.

The meaning of the cross emerges for each of us differently as we deepen our understanding of the spiritual journey. We emerge into a more open spiritual landscape that permits us room for curiosity and wondering about the nature of things.

The patient emerged from the coma changed because she felt the presence of God. As we awaken with the shadows of our dreams –or walk in the daylight of everyday ordinariness,

we also need to pay attention to sense God's signs. What are the signs before you?

Where is your cross?

So I pray:

Jesus, carrier of the cross, king of metaphors, God spoken in symbols, give my soul eyes to see; my heart ears to hear and my senses sensitivity to know you are near – always. Amen.