

The Fourth Sunday in Lent Year B 15th March, 2015



Image - Romanesque crucifix hanging in the Fuentiduena Chapel in The Cloisters, NYC.

It's a week of looking up. For the Israelites in the wilderness, it was looking up at a bronze snake that would open them to God's healing from the poisonous snakes in their camp. For Nicodemus it was looking up at the Christ who promised that when he was lifted up he would draw all people to himself. And now for us, we are called to look up, both as an act of repentance, turning away from what poisons us, and as an act of faith, trusting in God's grace and salvation.

May our worship lift our eyes to the Crucified One and give us the courage to do the tough but healing work of repentance.

INTRODUCTIONS

For use by lectors, in order of service, parish bulletins and magazines

Numbers 21 : 4-9

For the third time in the Bible, the Israelites on the pilgrimage to the Promised Land run out of food and water. This time there is no miraculous supply, only some relief from snake-bites when Moses made a serpent of bronze for healing. As Jesus reminded his hearers, whenever people raised their eyes to this sign, their illness was lifted from them.

Psalms 107:1-3, 17-22:

A song of praise for God who punished those who, in their foolishness disobeyed and rebelled, but who forgave and saved them when they called out to God.

Ephesians 2 : 1-10

It is by God's grace that we are saved, not by an effort of our own. Christ has been raised up into God's presence, and draws us up with him from death to life.

John 3 : 14-21

Three times John's gospel has Jesus speaking of being 'lifted up'. In this passage, Jesus recalls Moses lifting up the serpent for the healing of the people. Just so, says Jesus, the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that those who look to him and believe in him may have eternal life.

COLLECTS OF THE DAY

Collect One

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Grant, we beseech thee, Almighty God,
that we, who for our evil deeds
do worthily deserve to be punished,
by the comfort of thy grace may mercifully be relieved;
through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Collect Two

Lord God
whose blessed Son our Saviour
gave his back to the smiters
and did not hide his face from shame:
Give us grace to endure the sufferings of this present time
with sure confidence in the glory that shall be revealed;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

and/or

God of compassion,
whose Son Jesus Christ, the child of Mary,
shared the life of a home in Nazareth,
and on the cross drew the whole human family to himself:
Strengthen us in our daily living
that in joy and in sorrow
we may know the power of your presence
to bind together and to heal;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE 1

Presider or deacon

God lifted up Christ in the wilderness of the world. As we prepare for the paschal feast, let us lift up our prayers to God for all peoples everywhere.

Deacon or other leader

For the holy catholic church throughout the world, sharing the death and resurrection of Christ.

Lord, have mercy.

For *N* our bishop, for presbyters and deacons and all who minister in Christ, and for all the holy people of God.

Lord, have mercy.

For *NN* our catechumen(s) and *NN* their sponsor(s).

Lord, have mercy.

For all the peoples of the earth and for their leaders.

Lord, have mercy.

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For all who are sick, wandering, afflicted, or oppressed.

Lord, have mercy.

For the dying and the dead.

Lord, have mercy.

For our families, friends, and companions, and for all those we love.

Lord, have mercy.

Remembering *N*, and all the saints, let us offer ourselves and one another to the living God through Christ. **To you, O Lord.**

Presider

Blessed are you, God of Moses, who sent the light into the world. Receive the prayers we offer this day for those in need in every place and anoint the head of all who come to your table; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE 2

A: The word of God's great love for the world, though often overused, remains true. It becomes an invitation and a dividing point between faith and unbelief. It beckons to life eternal. With it in mind, we ask, "Restore us, O Christ," and respond with a fervent C: **Amen.**

A: Let us pray for Christian congregations grown old, worn smooth, and found weary.

P: Spirit of God, inspire us anew with the beloved story of Jesus and his love. Remove any tarnishing of gospel truth. Hurl back the darkness of subtle unbelief. Restore us O Christ. C: **Amen.**

A: Let us pray for leaders of governments that are tradition-bound, uncharitable and oppressive.

P: God of power and might, so speak to those who govern that they may seek a social order that cares for people and their wholeness. Restrain unmerited power and authority that deny just treatment. Plant deep in the hearts of those who take counsel for nations large and small, a will to serve and redeem. Restore us, O Christ. C: **Amen.**

A: Let us pray for those women and children who are abused by word and deed.

P: Graciously hide and protect those places in our community that offer refuge for those beleaguered by demeaning language and physical violation. Open the eyes of abusers to the unworthiness of such attacks. Let them see continuing threads of violence between generations. Restore us, O Christ. C: **Amen.**

A: Let us pray for those who are preparing for full membership in our congregation.

P: For those enrolled for the purpose of joining the family of faith, we ask that they may know at heart what it is to be saved by grace. Restore us, O Christ. C: **Amen.**

P: We commend everything to your care, God of grace.

C: Amen.

POST COMMUNION

Father,
through your goodness
we are refreshed through your Son
in word and sacrament.
May our faith be so strengthened and guarded
that we may witness to your eternal love
by our words and in our lives.
Grant this for Jesus' sake, our Lord.

and/or

Loving God,
as a mother feeds her children at the breast,
you feed us in this sacrament with spiritual food and drink.
Help us who have tasted your goodness
to grow in grace within the household of faith;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

PRAYERS

God of wilderness and water,
your Son was baptized and tempted as we are.
Guide us through this season,
that we may not avoid struggle,
but open ourselves to blessing,
through the cleansing depths of repentance
and the heaven-rending words of the Spirit. Amen.

Artist of souls,
you sculpted a people for yourself
out of the rocks of wilderness and fasting.
Help us as we take up your invitation to prayer and simplicity,
that the discipline of these forty days
may sharpen our hunger for the feast of your holy friendship,
and whet our thirst for the living water you offer
through Jesus Christ. Amen.

God of the covenant,
in the glory of the cross
your Son embraced the power of death
and broke its hold over your people.
In this time of repentance,
draw all people to yourself,
that we who confess Jesus as Lord
may put aside the deeds of death
and accept the life of your kingdom. Amen.

God of the living,
through baptism we pass from the shadow of death
to the light of the resurrection.

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Remain with us and give us hope
that, rejoicing in the gift of the Spirit
who gives life to our mortal flesh,
we may be clothed with the garment of immortality,
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

My brothers and sisters:
reconciled to God by the mercy of Christ,
we pray with confidence for the needs of the church and the world....
...Through Christ you make us a new creation, O God,
for with him we pass from sin to the new life of grace.
Accept our prayers in the warm embrace of your compassion,
and welcome all people to the festive banquet of your table,
where we may rejoice in your love
and celebrate the inheritance you have given to us.
We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Steadfast God,
you reach out to us in mercy
even when we rebel against your holy call
and prefer to walk in disobedience
rather than in the way of your divine truth.
soften our hearts with the warmth of your love,
that we may know your Son alive within us,
redeeming us
and raising us up into your eternal presence. Amen.

LECTIONARY NOTES 1

Numbers 21:4-9:

- I think this is one of the strangest passages in the Bible. Making a serpent of bronze to fend off poisonous snakes seems strangely idol-like to me, but God commands Moses to do this. And the snakes that are biting people were sent by God to begin with! I really don't get it.
- The people are again complaining to Moses - why did you take us from Egypt? They do this literally countless times. How do you think Moses keeps the faith? Their complaining no doubt wears on him.
- How do we act like the people? Complaining about what is new and reminiscing for the 'good old days'?

Psalms 107:1-3, 17-22:

- Steadfast, according to dictionary.com is "Firmly fixed or established; fast fixed; firm. 2. Not fickle or wavering; constant; firm; resolute; unswerving; steady. God's love for us is constant and unwavering. Take comfort!
- Verses 17-18 match up with our text from Numbers today.
- Do you believe that God causes our illnesses as a punishment from sin? That theology is certainly present in the scriptures, and here in this Psalm. Jesus tried to lead people to a different way of thinking, but even today, many associate sickness with punishment. What do you think?

Ephesians 2:1-10:

- a typical flesh/spirit argument going on in the first verses. The fleshly desires are bad and sinful. This argument seems so dismissive of the human God-created physical selves and tangible, bodily experiences that we have? Is it really so bad to be 'in the flesh'?
- God, rich in mercy. Jesus . . . immeasurable riches of his grace. Great phrases. What kind of riches do you want?
- "by grace you have been saved." - This cannot be said much more clearly. How are we saved? By grace! Not by what we do or don't do - we'd never make it that way. Not even by how strong our faith is. We respond in faith, but we're loved and saved by God's grace.

John 3:14-21:

- In verse 14, Jesus is referring to the passage we read in Numbers today. The serpent that Moses lifted up prevented the people dying from the poisonous snake bites. Jesus makes a parallel argument about his effect on people.
- :16 - Try this to look anew at the most famous verse of the Bible - where it says "the world," insert your own name. "For God so loved Beth that God gave his only Son . . . so that Beth who believes in him . . ." Then try it with the name of the person you like least. God so loved them too!
- :17 "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." This is an important verse, and I think it helps us ground verse :16, instead of using verse :16 as an exclusive litmus test type verse. Not to condemn. To save. I hear too many Christians in the condemning business. Less in the saving business.
- :20 - what in your life would you not want exposed to light? *By Beth Quick*

LECTIONARY NOTES 2

REFLECTIONS ON THEME:

On the borders of the Promised Land a generation who had never lived in Egypt (or, at least were too young to remember living there if they had) complained about the hardship of the wilderness and longed to "return" to Egypt. Hundreds of years later, Jesus uses the story of the plague of snakes that attacked these rebellious Israelites, and the bronze snake that God instructed Moses to erect for their healing, to describe the healing work he had come to do. A key to both stories is the willingness to admit what plagues us. To find healing the Israelites had to "look up" to the bronze snake. This was an act of repentance, turning their eyes from the fiery snakes, to the God who had cared for them for decades and now offered them healing. Those who love darkness, says Jesus, will not look up to him when he is lifted up, because to do so would take repentance and an admission of their need. Those who are unashamed and willing to come to the light will look up and find life. In the same way the Psalmist tells that those who rebelled but then repented (the song seems to reference the Old Testament story) found healing and were forgiven and saved. Finally, in Ephesians we are reminded that it is God's grace in Christ that saves us, which we appropriate simply by faith – which means that we recognise our need, and turn to God to meet it. The invitation of this week's Lectionary, then, is that God graciously and freely saves us, but, to live as "saved" people, we need to recognise our need, repent and look up to Jesus. The result of this, as Ephesians tells us, is a life of good works. We are saved by grace, changed by repentance and called to a life of meaning and abundance in the

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good works God has prepared for us. All of this means we face a decision today: Where do we need to repent, and how can this change our lives so that we become followers of Christ who bring grace to others through our good works?

CONNECTING WITH LIFE:

GLOBAL APPLICATION: The big question for the world this week is whether we will admit our need – the poison that is destroying us, our communities, our economies and our planet? Like the Israelites, it's easy to look at the hardships of the world and long for the "good old days", forgetting that those are the very days that brought us to this place. It's easy to hanker for what we don't have and to complain that God isn't "fixing" everything the way we want God to. What is much harder is to acknowledge our culpability in the break down of our world's systems. It's hard to face the way our greed and consumerism has brought suffering to others, and has put strain on our economic systems and on our planet. It's hard to recognise that our addiction to credit, to fossil fuels and to immediate gratification has had destructive consequences. It's hard to release our sense of entitlement, of exceptionalism, and to stop justifying our narcissism. But, until we are willing to do this, we will not find the healing we seek. As long as we force our leaders to put expediency first, in order to retain our votes, we will find no solutions. As long as we keep rewarding unjust employment conditions, and seek financial benefits over the humanity of abused workers in other countries, we will never find global peace or personal security. As long as we keep choosing immediate satisfaction over healthy eating and exercise, our economies will pay the price in health care costs for avoidable heart disease and diabetes. As long as we deny our tendency to judge and exclude others on the basis of prejudice and stereotyping, we will never find true community and belonging. However, in a world where denial has become a global pre-occupation, such true repentance requires great courage and great humility. It may be naive to believe that widespread repentance can happen in our world, but as small groups of people begin to take responsibility for their part in their struggles, begin to dream of a different world, honestly repent and commit to the "good works" of justice, simplicity, generosity, inclusivity and love, even in small ways, some measure of healing will be found. The choice is ours.

LOCAL APPLICATION: Denial is a destructive thing. When we fail to acknowledge our brokenness and apologise for hurting others, relationships break down. When we refuse to take responsibility for our own health, our own habits of eating and exercise, our bodies break down. When we refuse to look at our finances honestly, and admit our tendency to spend what we don't have, our peace of mind and our economic wellbeing breaks down. When we refuse to look at our beliefs and recognise when they fall into self-righteousness, exclusivity, legalism and judgmentalism our witness to Christ breaks down. In every family and community the pain of denial can be easily recognised. But, so can the healing and freedom that comes from honest repentance, true taking of responsibility, and committed work to change and do "good works". Every follower of Christ has a daily choice to live in the darkness of denial or the light of repentance. We can choose to know the salvation of God's healing and restoration, or stay in the poisoned wilderness of our own fear, pride and selfishness. This may sound harsh, but, it is only those who acknowledge their sickness who can find healing – as even Jesus taught. In this way, the call to repentance is not a "hellfire and damnation" message, but is an invitation to grace, to discover that there is nothing that can keep us from God's restoring mercy, or from God's liberating forgiveness. If we will just open ourselves to this truth, we will find the abundant life we seek by turning from our darkness, and moving into the light of truth and of God's love. Once again, the choice is ours.

ONLINE SERMON SOURCES

www.churchnewsireland.org

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Day 1 - What's in Your Future? - on *Ephesians 2:1-10*. "The terribly frustrating reality of life is that we have no control and the future is and will always be for us a trembling, wild, worry wart of a mystery.

"Unless...unless you are with Christ. The writer of Ephesians, he calls himself Paul, believes strongly that the future is no longer a mystery, for it has been revealed. He wants to show us our future and so like the ghost of a Dickens' Christmas classic, he grabs us by the hand and pulls us into the future, stopping at our graves and greeting us with those inspiring words, "You were dead...." And then he reads our obituary--it's not very flattering. Listen: "You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air ...the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses...by nature children of wrath...."

Concludes with a moving account of the laying on of hands with a retired missionary who is ill.

http://day1.org/1238-whats_in_your_future

America - Grace abounding. Homily by John R Donahue on By grace you have been saved through faith (Eph. 2:8). The three readings are related to each other by the preacher, and he concludes with John this, "In announcing God's love for the world John's vision embraces the whole cosmos, not simply an elect people, so that "everyone" who believes may be saved. God's love is more dominant in the Johannine writings than anywhere else in the New Testament. God is love (1 Jn. 4:8); love is the mutual relationship between Jesus and the Father (Jn. 15:9-10; 17:23); Jesus loves his disciples and says that their love of service and friendship is to be a hallmark of discipleship (Jn. 13:34-35; 15:12-14). The paschal season is the public affirmation and renewal of such love.

"The concluding verses present the shadow side of Johannine theology: Whoever does not believe in Jesus has already been condemned, because they loved darkness more than light. They embody John's "realized eschatology" in which judgment occurs during the ministry of Jesus rather than at the end of history (cf. Mt. 25:31-46, "Sheep and Goats"). They also reflect controversies in John's community over explicit belief in the divinity of Jesus. When interpreted in a fundamentalist sense, these comments lead to a sectarian theology of salvation and an incorrect understanding of mission and evangelization."

http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=612

America - How do I love Thee? On the text - God...is rich in mercy (Eph 2:4). The preacher commences:

*"How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
my soul can reach when feeling out of sight
for the ends of being and ideal grace.*

"These tender words of the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning reflect a bit of the all-encompassing character of human love. But human love is a reflection of divine love and participates in it. For this reason, these words could well be placed in the mouth of God this Sunday, for all three readings illustrate God's merciful love."

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She proceeds on to an examination of God's love as shown in the season of Lent. "During the first three weeks of Lent we considered various aspects of our covenant relationship with God and the privileges and responsibilities that flow from it. Today we turn our gaze on God's covenant relationship with us, and we are astounded at what we perceive. Despite our infidelity, God remains faithful to us; despite the steps we take toward our own destruction, God continues to offer us a second chance at life. Such is the "depth and breadth and height" of God's love.

"However—and it is a significant however—God does not force anything upon us. We are free to choose. We can accept God's loving gestures, or we can refuse them. We see this in today's readings. Before the Israelites could return to the land, they had to return to God. In the Gospel account, Nicodemus was told that people can choose to believe or not believe in Christ; they can prefer darkness to the light. There has always been a choice. Today the choice is ours to make. Will we make it?"

http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=2863

Sermons that work- Laetare sunday - Scroll down for sermon by Frank Hegedus. No matter how you name this sunday it is in the middle of Lent. " Life itself, of course, is made up of middle points and transitions to which we attribute unique and special importance. It is human nature to mark time, to take note of milestones and halfway points. We may remember being halfway through high school or college; halfway through a transition between rectors at Church; or halfway through a project at work. And mothers will certainly remember being halfway through pregnancy, eager for the birth of their child.... Whatever the effort, being halfway through something is special. It can bring either anxiety or a foretaste of accomplishment. Or both."

<http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/stw/2009/03/?cat=7>

CHILDREN

The Children's Sermon - John 3 : 16. Takes the simple approach - this is the gospel in one sentence - and its about love.

<http://thechildrenssermon.com/john3.html>

Sermons4Kids - The Life Saver - whilst originally written for Trinity Sunday - it does a good job on John 3:16. Suggested visual - a life vest.

<http://www.sermons4kids.com/lifesaver.html>

Sermons4Kids - The Greatest Gift of all - again on 3:16. Visual needed a gift wrapped package.

http://www.sermons4kids.com/greatest_gift_of_all.htm

HYMN SUGGESTIONS

Beneath The Cross Of Jesus

My Faith Looks Up To Thee

Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah

Giver Of Gifts

Man Of Sorrows! What A Name

This Place

Jesus Messiah (Link to YouTube video)

The Wonder Of The Cross (Link to YouTube video) (Free PDF Chord Chart Download)

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Crucified

Clinging To The Cross (Link to YouTube video)

Please commend this resource to colleagues - they simply send an email to churchnewsireland@gmail.com with the message Passwords in the title