

Gospel Reflections for Sunday 8th March 2020

[John 3: 1 -17](#)

I hate snakes! I really do.

The word for a fear of snakes is *ophiophobia*. Snakes are *ophio* alright! The dictionary says *ophiophobia* is an 'abnormal' fear of snakes but I figure it's quite normal and sensible to be fearful of those ssslippery, sly, scaly, sneaky, slithery, scary, spiteful and sssickening creatures.

The children of Israel knew all about *ophiophobia*, or what that translates to in Hebrew. In Numbers 21, after the Israelites' latest showing of faithlessness, the snakes were all over the place, biting and killing at will - I'm a bit freaked out just imagining the scene. Moses, on God's command and in response to prayer, makes a bronze snake and pops it on a pole. Instead of sickness and death, this becomes a place of life and healing to those who look upon it. God teaches his people about his grace and healing in quite a confronting way.

The current corona-virus epidemic has brought the World Health Organisation (WHO) to the forefront of public consciousness. Maybe I've read too many Dan Brown and Matthew Reilly novels but as I read this week's Gospel reading, I recalled WHO's flag/emblem. It *'consists of the United Nations symbol surmounted by a staff with a snake coiling round it. The staff with the snake has long been a symbol of medicine and the medical profession. It originates from the story of Asclepius, who was revered by the ancient Greeks as a god of healing and whose cult involved the use of snakes.'* (WHO website www.who.int)

There is also winged version used in medical circles known as a 'caduceus', and it said that the stick is a staff carried by the Olympian god Hermes. But I digress...



Is it coincidence that this symbol, synonymous with healing, also matches the account in Numbers? Maybe not such a huge leap I would have thought although it's not referred to on any of the official sites (eg AMA, WHO). Could it be that Moses' bronze snake on a pole is to this day a symbol of healing all around the world? Interesting isn't it that many are *looking up* to WHO and the medical fraternity in this time of global need.

Jesus on the other hand wants a very clear connection made – this Old Testament incident with the people of Israel, points directly to himself, THE healer. Jesus said to Nicodemus, *'Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.'* (John 3: 14-15). The cross, on which Jesus was lifted up, becomes the real symbol of healing in every way. Jesus wants us to look only to one place for true healing – himself, the crucified Lord.

One further and maybe uncomfortable question I have about this metaphor – What is the meaning of the snake on the pole? Is it Jesus or something else? One would normally associate Satan as a snake, but surely not Jesus? Is it a reference somehow to the Genesis account of the Fall? That Jesus is the one foretold to crush the serpent's head *'he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.'* (Gen 3:15). One thought might be the snake represents my sin that Jesus took upon himself. The slippery, sly, scaly, sneaky, slithery, scary, spiteful and sickening thing on the pole is actually my guilt and shame that Jesus takes on himself in my place. He takes the venomous bite of Satan that was meant to kill me and he absorbs that poison himself on that pole... he dies and I am healed.

Like Nicodemus in this week's reading, perhaps I too am slow to understand what Jesus is on about.

This Lent remember Jesus the Good Physician, who lays down his life for the full and total healing of the patient whom he loves. Let's place ourselves at the foot of the cross and look up to him and live!

'For 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. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.' John 3:16-17

Blessings on your week ahead.

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