

26th March 2006 Lent Four B

Rob Lamerton

Readings:

- Numbers 21:4-9
- Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22
- Ephesians 2:1-10
- John 3:14-21

Text of readings is available at <http://divinity.library.vanderbilt.edu/lectionary/BLent/bLent4.htm>

Lent 4B - God so loved the world

Last week I mentioned in the pewsheet that Bishop George Browning had said "St Philip's is one of two Canberra parishes most likely to go out of business". Many people were annoyed at the statement and expressed their anger, frustration, disappointment etc. etc.

I took what the bishop said as a challenge because I think that we have a strong and growing congregation, we have minimal debt, we pay our dues to the Diocese, we are undertaking some building projects to improve our church site as a place of ministry, and I believe we have a happy congregation! It was mentioned however that some of our members do not feel as connected in to the family as they should. Also the question about our connection to the "local" community was an issue we ought to confront. If any one sees it differently then you had better let me know!

I also wonder what the measure of a "successful" parish is?

Either way I think we can only prove him wrong by making St Philip's a place where we come face to face with Christ in our worship and in each other AND

where the world around can see and enter into the kingdom of God with us!

And that is the meaning of the words to "have eternal life" from the gospel today... to "see" or "enter into" the kingdom of God.

In that sense the church should be a home — a place where people belong.

For many years this Sunday was known as Mothering Sunday or Laetare (refreshment) Sunday because it was a "day off" in the middle of the Lenten fast. The original New Testament epistle reading from Galatians ch 4. for this day referred to "Jerusalem ... our mother"

There were two other traditions also attached: Evidently it was also the custom in some parts of England to visit to one's mother on this day and it was also the custom in some places to visit the "mother church" of the Diocese the Cathedral. With Mother's Day in May we have taken a different theme.

This week St Joseph's Day was observed and also the Annunciation (the angel's visit) to the Blessed Virgin Mary. A reminder that Jesus was provided with both a human father and mother.

So instead of the "mother" theme I think it should be more one of HOME! or even FAMILY...

HOME — God gathering and bringing his people home in the psalm!

Home in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus from the letter to the Ephesians and *home* in the eternal life spoken of in the gospel. In the first reading also the people of Israel were travelling "home" to the promised land when they complained and were plagued by snakes.

The sense of coming home to God is very real!

John in his gospel refers to this strange story from the Old Testament about the people of God becoming impatient and complaining and so being plagued by snakes.

The people regretted that they had ever left Egypt. Even though it was a place of oppression and slavery it was familiar and the home they were heading for — the "Promised Land" was still a long way off.

Sometimes *our* journey seems that it is no longer worthwhile and our home with God so far off that it is not worth continuing.

We read of the encounter with poisonous snakes (sent by God) and how the people cried for mercy. So Moses is instructed to make a bronze serpent and place it on a pole. Held up in the middle of the camp it became their sign of healing for all who looked upon it.

In later times the serpent became an image and an idol and in the time of Hezekiah (2 Kings 18.4) it had to be destroyed because people were worshipping it and not God who gave it!

Given that they were forbidden to make graven images, the Jews were perplexed by this incident however the Rabbis explained that it was not the serpent which killed and gave life. They said "Israel looked and as long as Moses lifted up the serpent, they believed in him who had commanded Moses to act in this way. It was God who healed them" (William Barclay commentary p 124).

The serpent was a sign and symbol and a pointer towards God. When their thoughts, hearts and minds, were turned to God they were healed!

Often on our journey we need to be reminded to turn our thoughts to God.

So in John's gospel Jesus applies it to himself. When the Serpent was lifted up and hearts and minds turned to God people were healed, so too must Jesus be lifted up and hearts and minds turned to him by believing — THEN will people find eternal life. Then will they enter into / then will they see eternal life — the life of the age to come when Christ rules! They will see the suffering Christ AND they will see the glorified Christ.

The lifting up of the Son of Man refers to the lifting up

of the cross but it also refers to his exaltation his being lifted up to glory. (These combined images appear in ch.8 and ch.12 in Acts ch.2 and ch.5 and in Philippians ch.2)

Remember — in this story Jesus is talking to Nicodemus (but we are never sure in this story just where John's words stop and Jesus' words begin)

So what is the purpose of all this?

For God so loved the World,

so that everyone who believes in him may not perish

but may have eternal life.

As I ponder this and the story of the bronze serpent I think that we are on our journey to God and on that journey we often find ourselves impatient and complaining — miserable about our lot and then as we turn our hearts and minds to Christ sharing our struggle and suffering on the cross and at the same time we see the path to our home with God — the glory! And we find comfort strength and healing on our way.

I recall some lovely people who when I was first ordained offered me an open invitation to their home. I often went there to rest and watch football and have a meal. It was NOT my home but it gave me a sense of that comfort strength and healing of spirit, that I was in a safe caring and friendly place.

I suppose that is what I am thinking about that time when on life's journey we turn to the cross and find Christ shares our struggles and warms our hearts. These are the places and moments we can offer to one another! This is what we as a Christian congregation can offer to each other. This is what the Church is called to be ...a home on the journey to our eternal home, not just a place of ease but a place where we are also challenged about our being disciples.

I am heartened by the fact that we can stay today and

renew friendships with David and Beryl Gowty over lunch.

I am heartened by the proposal that Ben and Fiona Dyer have put forward about a gathering of families with young children.

I am heartened by the formation of the Parish Council for 2006 and the proposals for the sub groups ever widening the sharing of tasks.

Because I think we have a special relationship among us at St Philip's as we seek to be Christians together and I look forward to proving the bishop wrong in his assessment.

May we continue our journey to our eternal home in the knowledge that we have a home amongst each other.