

# Homily for people and parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 10<sup>th</sup> March 2024, Lent 4

Readings: **Exodus 21:4-9**  
(*Ephesians 2:1-10*)

**Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22**  
**John 3:14-21**

When I was studying at St Francis College in the early nineties, I had a lecturer who was an expert on the Eastern Orthodox Church and was a consultant for Orthodox-Anglican dialogue in Australia. Consequently, he would invariably compare Western Catholic understanding, and Eastern Orthodox understanding, of such things as the Doctrine of the Trinity. He would also slip in provocative statements to stimulate thinking and after we responded he'd dig deeper and challenge us to articulate what we believe and why. There was always food for thought... and vigorous discussion.

One afternoon he asked if we had seen photos of black clothed Greek Orthodox widows standing to pray in front of small candles. Most of us agreed that the image was familiar. Drawing from his research, and from his friendship with many in the Orthodox tradition, he explained that some of those widows were lighting a candle and praying for Satan!

We were shocked, and thought that surely this was not true. Smiling, he reminded us that he'd said that they were praying FOR Satan, and not TO Satan, and that this was grounded in the Orthodox understanding that God's love is infinite. Those widows, he suggested, are asking for God who is infinitely loving, to forgive... even Satan. 'Think about it!' he challenged as the lecture finished – 'and we'll discuss it next time!'

Intellectually, I recognise how this understanding can be supported through reading the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke's Gospel where Jesus explains that God's love is much more than we can understand. But, the idea seems to be at odds with the final judgement described in Matthew's Gospel in which sheep are separated from goats, and there is a promised accountability before God at some stage. The thought of Satan being forgiven at some stage, clashes with a western way of thinking, and a western inclination to polarise things. Surely there is good and evil; love and hate; light and dark; innocent and guilty; freedom and captivity; justice and injustice?

I don't think we're that comfortable with complexity, or mystery, or shades of grey!

When we read the Scriptures, and listen to them being read in church, we sometimes encounter images and understandings of God that we struggle with. Sometimes there appears to be a dissonance between the understandings of God articulated by parts of the Old Testament, compared with understandings of God articulated by Jesus in the Gospels. The Old Testament suggests 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,' and Jesus in the New

Testament suggests, ‘forgive your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.’ How do we reconcile or come to terms with these differences?

In the Old Testament reading from Numbers this week God is not remembered as being infinitely loving. Indeed, God is portrayed as being pretty cranky! The people of Israel were wandering in the wilderness, and they were complaining to Moses that conditions were tough, and that maybe they had been better off in Egypt.

In response to their complaining and lack of gratitude the Old Testament reading tells us that God sent poisonous snakes amongst them, and that many died after they’d been bitten. Is this the same God that Jesus addressed as ‘Abba’ – quite literally ‘Dad’ in Aramaic? Is this the same God that we call Father when we pray the Lord’s Prayer? What kind of father would send poisonous snakes to bite his children when they played up? If my Dad had used this approach when I was young, I would never have survived High School!

Happily, there was a redeeming part to this experience because Moses prayed and asked God to have mercy and give the, now terrified, people of Israel a break. God relented and directed Moses to make a bronze image of a snake so that all who’d been bitten could look on it and be healed. Remarkably, this image of a bronze snake on a pole continues to be used as a symbol of healing in modern medicine today.

Yet that image of God as being impatient and even vindictive is a recurring theme for the people of Israel in the wilderness journey. Whenever the people are disobedient or complaining there is punishment and death, until Moses intercedes on their behalf and persuades God to change his mind. The nature of God expressed in that passage is not someone who is infinitely loving, patient, or kind.

Then, like rain falling after an oppressive dry season, we hear today’s reading from the Gospel of John. It contains one of the best-known verses in the New Testament, *‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life...’* Just before this well-known verse is the much lesser known *‘Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.’*

So in the same way that the Jewish people remembered a bronze snake on a pole as a symbol of healing, life and hope, those who have faith in the risen Christ remember Jesus on the cross as a symbol of healing, life, and hope.

I am not sure what those Greek Orthodox widows do with this text. Clearly, there is accountability demanded and a promised judgement. But, condemnation is not inevitable - we can choose between light and darkness; good and evil; death and eternal life.

The ancient question of how to win approval from God was explored by human communities for thousands of years before Jesus. In multiple cultures it was thought that in order to appease the gods some sort of sacrifice was necessary and for some religions this involved killing people. So, God's direction to Abraham to take his only son Isaac up a hill and kill him would have been understandable to the people of that time... however, appalling the thought is for us in our time.

Then, came a breakthrough – God did not want Isaac's life, he was apparently just testing Abraham's faith! So, happily for Isaac, a ram was caught in a nearby thicket and was killed by Isaac. The ritual sacrifice of animals for sin was thus long established and understood by the Jewish community at the time of Jesus. For small sins some doves would be ritually killed in the Jerusalem Temple. For more significant sins, sheep, goats, or cattle were killed – and all of these had to be of good quality. However, for certain sins no sacrifice would be enough, and no hope was offered, just the promise of eternal damnation.

Into that understanding came, *'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.'* Remember that Isaac was Abraham's only son so the association would have been very clear for those who were Jewish. No more human sacrifice, no more animal sacrifice, no more burnt offerings... just the call to believe in Jesus who was the Christ.

I often light a candle as a focus in prayer for in this I am reminded of Christ, called the light of the world. I cannot bring myself to pray for Satan... but I do pray for the miracle of a sustainable peace between Ukraine and Russia and between the Palestinian Territories and Israel. I pray for the healing of cancer in the life two friends and, with you, for blessing in the lives of many.

Would you please join with me in prayer now:

Holy God, we give thanks for the gift of our lives, and for your infinite love. We thank you for the wisdom you have given through the ages that helps us to navigate the complexities of human existence. We ask for your blessing on all who live with some form of darkness... that they may know your light, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.