

Lent 4 2018

As you all know, some years ago I worked at the university in Chichester. Eve, another member of staff at the college and I were extremely close and got on very well, not only because we often liaised over the students in our care, but also because we had many things in common. But there was one thing that I really didn't understand about her. She had three sons who she loved very much, and they loved her too. Having come out of an abusive marriage in which there was much violence towards her and to the boys by her alcoholic husband, they had grown together as a close and loving family and often the boys came back to visit her and bought her small presents, and they had lovely meals and times together. By the time I knew them, the three boys had grown up and were working. Each year however, on Mothering Sunday Eve's mood used to nose dive. 'If I don't even get a card from my boys this year', she used to say, 'there's going to be big trouble!' Apparently, her sons often used to forget Mothering Sunday and, although I used to ask her why a card made any difference at all when she knew that her children loved her, she always replied that Mothering Sunday was her day, and she liked to be shown a bit of that love from time to time. Sure enough one year I arrived at Eve's house on Mothering Sunday. There was a bit of a commotion going on in the garden. It appeared that all three sons had forgotten and Eve had nagged and nagged about not even having a card - let alone flowers or chocolates - that the youngest son Adam had gone into town and returned with a card and a present. The card showed a recalcitrant young boy having a saucepan full of baked beans poured over his head having broken a window of the house. And I arrived just at the point where Eve had decided to teach him a lesson and was hilariously re-enacting the scene on the card and was attempting to pour some beans from a saucepan over the head of her 6' 4" son.

How do we know that someone loves us? What evidence is there that someone loves us? In the beginning of course, there may be expensive gifts, and hand-held walks, stolen moments and secret jokes, holidays taken together which will always be remembered, evenings out with friends, drives into the country, romantic meals in a dimly lit restaurant. For many there will be the looked forward to plans to make for their wedding. For equally as many however, years later the scene looks markedly different. There may be children to look after, vying for attention from both parents, the couple may both have demanding and stressful jobs, and the outward signs of the exclusive love between the couple seem not as overt as they once were, and time as a couple comes to be valued, treasured and looked forward to. Outward shows of affection and the intimacy of the teen years or of the first flashes of mutual love may be less frequent - but that doesn't mean that the couple love each other any less.

For many Christians this can also epitomize their relationship with God. Many Christian writers often tell of the time when they felt an intimate relationship with God, a time when they felt so close to Him and relished the fellowship they experienced in their original home church, or in the chaplaincy at the university, or at Spring Harvest, Walsingham, Caister or another Christian event they attended. Many writers speak of a time when their faith was so discernible that you could almost see or touch it. But many writers also specify that, with the passing of time, with the pressures of life, as they move to another church, as problems beset them, as other relationships take up time, that their relationship with God seems to have faded. Perhaps their perception is that His love has grown cold and that they can't feel Him as being as close as they once felt him to be, or that the fellowship, worship or preaching at their current church doesn't match that of their formative years as Christians. Many testify to the fact that they drifted away from the Church, some doubted whether God's love for them was as strong as it once was - or theirs for God, some even wondered whether God exists at all.

'Heilsgeschichte' is the German word invented by the 19th century German theologian Johann von Hofman. 'Heilsgeschichte' literally means 'salvation history', a concept which is fundamental to the Jewish faith. The Passover, the flight from slavery in Egypt, the wandering in the wilderness for forty years, the giving of the Covenant by the Ten Commandments and the entry into the Promised Land - the frequent recounting of these events takes on an almost credal importance, the recitation of these events being recounted frequently in the Old Testament writings.

The Passover, the escape from Egypt, the cross of the Red Sea, all have miraculous overtones, but human nature, being as it is, thankfulness soon turned to doubt and dissatisfaction for the ancient Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness in an almost nomadic way, waiting for the way forward to make itself known. Exodus and the Psalms tell us that, having established a covenanted relationship with God through the Commandments and being God's chosen people so long as they observed this covenant, that this relationship often broke down as the people, in their ignorance, enduring their hardship as nomadic refugees, as they became disillusioned, they began to murmur against God, turned from him and turning to that which they knew from their past and from the cultures around them – idolatry.

The account of this historical event can be found in Numbers chapter 21. As the people complain and speak against God and turn away from him, we are told that God sends a plague of deadly snakes and when the snakes bit the people, many of them died. As victims of the plague of serpents the people repent and turn to God. Moses is then instructed to make an image of the fiery serpent and to hold it up in the midst of the people, and those who looked upon the serpent were cured. The fiery serpent was then a cure against the sin of the people who broke the covenant with God and turned from him.

We probably will never know what actually happened, but it seems likely that according to the story as recounted in Numbers that the people were prone to snake bites in the wilderness, so much so, that it was a significant incident, such that it made its way into the Heilsgeschichte, the Salvation History of the Jews. As with all historic writing in the Bible of course, some form of interpretation and explanation needs to be considered to get behind the story and what actually may have happened here. What we have in this account, as with all writings in the Bible, is a theological explanation of historic events. In other words, reflections by the authors of Numbers as to what happened and how these events might be explained by reference to the relationship between the Chosen People and God. The plague of snakes is interpreted therefore as being a punishment to the people who have broken this special covenanted relationship with God. A historic event is thus given a theological explanation.

It is this very event at such a crucial time in the establishment of the Israelites as being God's Chosen People that John refers to in his gospel. Part of the problem it would seem in the story of the fiery serpent is that it seems to have taken on a sort of idolatrous status among the ignorant people and it seems that some of the people worshipped it because of its curative qualities. But it was not the fiery serpent per se that was God, but the power of God himself who gave pardon for sin and healing to the people, and that is what the fiery serpent signified.

How then do we know then that God loves us? How do we know when we feel far from God that he loves us? How do we re-establish our relationship with Him when we seem to have grown cold? Look at the cross. As the fiery serpent was lifted up and the people were forgiven and cured of their sin, so John states, that Jesus was lifted up on the cross, and when we look

at the cross we see the self giving, sacrificial unconditional love that is the very essence of God. For when we look at the cross, we see the extent to which God will go to bring us back to himself.