



Sermon preached by Dr Augur Pearce on Sunday 14 March 2021

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

When Elders are ordained, one of the questions they are asked runs like this: ‘In dependence on God's grace, do you reaffirm your trust in Jesus Christ as saviour and Lord and your promise to follow him and to seek to do and to bear his will all the days of your life?’

That is very similar to the affirmation asked of everybody entering on the full responsibilities and privileges of membership in the United Reformed Church, except that the word ‘reaffirm’ assumes the promise will have been made before, since nobody becomes an Elder without spending some time as a church member beforehand.

The fact that we all made this affirmation is one of the things that unites those of us who are soon to lay down, at least for a time, the role of Serving Elders in this congregation. We are different people in so many ways: in our backgrounds, our ages, our lifestyles, our views, and in what we have sought to contribute. We are pastors and carers, teachers and lawyers, communicators and safeguarders, young mothers and grandparents. None of us is all of these things; but we are all people who place our trust in Jesus Christ and are seeking to carry out the mission he has entrusted to us, whether individually or together.

So I should like today to consider that Elders’ (or indeed church members’) affirmation, with the aid of the readings we have just heard.

At the centre of those readings, I believe, comes trust; with self-knowledge and repentance not far behind, and also an invitation to practical action.

You may well have heard this from me before. Trust is often the refrain to the sermons I have been privileged to preach, now at Downing Place, formerly at St Columba’s, and occasionally elsewhere; because trust lies for me at the heart of that relationship with a personal God, revealed in Jesus as creating, loving, forgiving, healing and inspiring, which gives me motivation to do what I do and confidence to travel over the bumps in life’s road.

Trust may seem a strange ideal for a lawyer, part of whose task is always to advise or draft for the worst-case scenario: to protect against the danger somebody will do things wrong, will act in bad faith, will twist one’s words if they are less than crystal-clear. Yet trust is a crucial part of the armour with which young people must face the uncertainties of the modern world, and older people must face the sometimes alarming pace of change in attitudes, relationships or technology. Trust is so important, though often so difficult, for many in our society: for those who begin a new chapter in a new country, or embark on new positions or projects, or have to adapt after economic blows, or changes in quality of life, or to existence continuing without a loved one.

A lack of trust was part of the background to today's first reading from Numbers. The people of Israel, on their way to the promised land, found the direct route blocked because the King of Edom refused them safe passage. The resulting detour made the journey, which had already been more than long enough, even longer (sounds familiar, maybe?) and they were getting sick of their monotonous diet of manna, though it had already saved their lives. They blamed, of course, as we usually do, the nearest scapegoat to hand – Moses. 'Why have you brought us out of Egypt to die in this wilderness? We've got no decent food, not enough to drink, and we're sick of this manna.' But though addressed to Moses, this was really a vote of no confidence in God.

The Hebrew Scriptures often portray God as punishing conduct of which the writers disapprove. The snakes that came out of the sand and inflicted lethal bites on many of the complainers are depicted as a crisis the Israelites brought upon themselves. The Psalmist saw things the same way: 'Some were sick through their sinful ways'. Cranmer's prayer for use 'In time of any common plague or sickness', still to be found in the current edition of the Book of Common Prayer, places the event in the wilderness alongside another outbreak in the reign of David, which followed the census narrated in the Second Book of Samuel. In this century and in this country, where the plague has come before the census, we might not go along with the ancient understanding of cause and effect. But let us leave such reflections to one side and concentrate on the fact that the Israelites were suffering, and many dying, when Moses, at their request, approached God in prayer for a remedy.

That remedy seems a bit strange. A bronze model of a single snake, raised up on a long pole for the community to look at. A hair of the dog that bit them, perhaps? A small fraction of what caused their problem, made to serve as its solution, long before anyone thought of vaccination. Why did it work? There was nothing particularly special about the bronze snake itself – indeed it had to be broken up during King Hezekiah's reforms in Judah, centuries later, because it had become an object of idolatry. But for the very reason that there was no logic to it, the act of looking at the snake showed trust on the part of the people who had previously doubted God and Moses. They had asked for help, and they then accepted the help God offered, although they could not see, any more than we can, why looking at a sculpture should cure a venomous bite.

So now let us look at the way Jesus, according to John's Gospel, used this story as a simile. His audience was just one single individual: someone who did trust, but in a guarded and qualified manner: Nicodemus, the Pharisee and 'ruler of the Jews' who had come by night and been baffled by Jesus' talk of rebirth in order to see the Kingdom of God. Jesus explains he means rebirth by the Holy Spirit, whose action he compares to the unpredictable wind. Then later he says '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.'

If we were in any doubt whether 'the lifting up of the Son of Man' referred to the crucifixion, that doubt can, I suggest, be dispelled. In chapter 12 of the same Gospel Jesus says that if he is 'lifted up from the earth', he will draw all people to him, but there John adds a comment that this signified how Jesus would die. So here in chapter 3 we have a link being made between the Cross, faith or trust leading to eternal life, and Moses' bronze snake.

Oddly enough, I think that helps to explain both stories more clearly. Why would 'lifting up' on the Cross draw others to Jesus? Is this a matter of adoration, that we just cannot take our eyes from his love and the suffering to which it leads? Certainly, some Christian spirituality

makes much of ‘gazing on Jesus’ and I don’t say that is wrong. But if that were meant here, surely the bronze snake would have been an inappropriate comparison. The Israelites were not being encouraged to gaze on the snake in worship or veneration. Indeed, once they started doing that, King Hezekiah saw it had outlived its usefulness and had to go.

No, rather, I suggest, when we ‘survey the wondrous Cross’ it is the beginning of something more practical: of repentance and to action. Nicodemus was being told that Jesus’ ‘lifting up’ at his death would make him visible to those who had previously not known him or not trusted him, and give them an opportunity to return to trust and obedience. If viewed in that way, the simile of the snake in the wilderness is more than apt.

Jesus’ later words speak of coming to the light, allowing one’s past conduct to be exposed and judged. But that isn’t altogether divorced from the first theme of trust – we fallible mortals, like Nicodemus, like the Israelites in the desert, can admit where we fall short precisely because we feel sure of a judge who sympathises with our weakness, and would rather stand alongside us than condemn. ‘Look at the snake – look at the thing you’re so afraid of, the symbol of punishment for your grumbling and distrust and rebellion. Admit you were wrong. But look at the snake because the very God whom you offended is a forgiving God; and you will find the venom drawn out of your veins. Things will be all right again, and it will be a huge relief.’

The practical side of our Christian commitment, also included in the Elders’ affirmation, is ‘to follow [Christ] and to seek to do his will’. This is what leads us to take seriously Gospel commands to teach and baptise, to break bread and share wine in his memory, to love our neighbours and do to others as he has done to us.

Paul reminds the church in Ephesus that we do not follow as a way of winning God’s favour. They (and we) have that already. ‘By grace you have been saved through faith; and this is ... not the result of works, so that no-one may boast’. Nevertheless, doing Christ’s will is one reason why we exist. ‘We are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.’ And that also extends to ‘bearing Christ’s will’ – the part of the affirmation easily overlooked.

I have always understood this in the sense of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s moving hymn ‘*Von guten Mächten wunderbar geborgen*’. Fred Pratt Green’s translation of the third verse runs as follows:

And when the cup you give is filled to brimming
with bitter suffering hard to understand,
We take it thankfully and without trembling
out of so good and so beloved a hand.

This much-loved hymn is possibly over-used in German protestantism: it sets a standard few in either country ever really achieve. Bonhoeffer practised what he preached, facing martyrdom just weeks after the hymn was written. But I should be very wary of claiming I would do the same; and perhaps none of us knows whether we would really press our trust in God that far. But some of those listening now have certainly suffered grievous blows in life. Grief and loss, illness and disaster; or perhaps just disappointment, learning the hard way that our dearest ambitions and best-laid plans are not after all to come to fruition. Even when pitched at that more modest level, bearing Christ’s will is not easy. But our promise is only

that we will seek to do so, in dependence on God's grace; and once again trust – the trust of which Bonhoeffer's hymn is so redolent – is the key to making that attempt.

So there is one of the promises we made as Elders or church members. And we undertook that our attempt to keep them would continue 'all the days of our life'. Regardless what offices we may hold or lay down, that was a lifetime profession of faith and service. May we all be given the strength we need to fulfil that promise.

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures for ever.