

## Sermon for Evensong Epiphany 5 2021

*The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food."*

I have always been fascinated by this account of the bronze serpent in the wilderness. From every angle the teaching of scripture is that we should not worship idols. The second of the ten commandments is very clear about making idols. *"You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments."*

Like I said, I am fascinated by this. It is important to remember that the people are once again complaining about the conditions that they have forced to endure in the wilderness. In the past they have directed their anger towards Moses. "Why have you brought us out into the wilderness to die? Why can we not return to Egypt? At least we were fed there."

They complain that the Manna that God supplies is bland and miserable. They complain that they are short of water. They complain and complain and complain.

The area that they have arrived in is renowned for the high incidence of snakes. Other travellers have commented on the reptile population in this particular place. It is little wonder then that they were experiencing a high incidence of snake bite and that many were dying.

What we may not realize is that the serpent on the pole is an image taken from Egyptian superstition. The people would remember the images and the flags that they were to worship when they were slaves. The serpent banner, in fact any banner authorised was considered to have some form of divinity. Therefore, the bronze serpent on a stick was something that came from their Egyptian life. It echoed of a former path of divinity.

Rather than creating an idol, the bronze serpent is created under instruction from God. It is God who told the people that when they were bitten by a snake they would look to the serpent and live. And it was God who healed them by removing the toxicity from their body.

The serpent on the pole was not an idol, but a reminder that God brings healing to all who look to him in faith. Unfortunately, the serpent took on a different purpose in the mind of the people. In the first instance their salvation was from God, but as legend and stories of the past grew, so did the importance of the bronze snake. They took the bronze snake onwards as they continued their travels in the wilderness, they took it into the promised land. In time it became in their minds an object of holiness in its own right. In short, it became an idol. It became the very thing that the people were instructed to avoid.

It is very easy for objects to replace the power of God. I have icons in my study at home, but I do not worship them. It is easy to misunderstand the instruction of God and turn situations into the opposite of that which God commands.

The bronze serpent was not powerful in its own right. Rather it was an image which would turn the people's minds toward God as they experienced healing from snake bite. God said to look to the bronze serpent, and when the people were obedient to the call from God they were healed. The people reversed this and in time it was the bronze serpent which brought healing. There was a leader some years later who demanded that the bronze serpent be destroyed because in the mind of the people it had replaced God.

We find a similar problem in the reading from John. The pharisees were convinced that they had power over the population when it came to the Law. The Law stated that no work was to be performed on the Sabbath. Therefore, when Jesus cured the man blind from birth, on the Sabbath, he has broken the Law. The Pharisees were using the book of the Law like the ancient Jews used the bronze serpent. The Law had effectively become God. It was the Law that must be obeyed while God began to shrink away.

When Jesus healed the man blind from birth it is a valuable reminder that only God can heal. Only God can answer prayer. Only God can respond to our heartfelt prayers.

We do not have to look very far at all to recognise the current Bronze serpent and the current Law. These are the things that can replace God in our mind and heart. These days it will be the god of success; or the god of wealth; or the god of power over the lives of others. It is so very easy to begin to believe that some of the temporary things of this world will be all we need for eternal happiness. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The only thing that can bring us to eternal content, harmony and happiness is the love of our God. That love which is proven, not with the lifting up of a bronze serpent, but with the lifting up of the Son of Man on the cross of crucifixion. It is the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ that will bring eternal salvation. There is nothing else.