

Symbols and suffering- Lent 5 Wyndham 21st March 21

READINGS : Numbers 21:4-9; Hebrews 5:7-9; *A Thousand, a million, a trillion Tongues* by Walter Brueggemann; John 12:20-33

Metaphors and symbols are the understory of scripture. While they are not as definable (and agreeable) as translations or history lessons – they are what spoke to the people at the time and speak to us now. And we may never agree. Let's talk about symbols and signs.

I walked with a patient who was deep in faith but wounded by the church. Her husband, who was a Minister, left her for another and to her surprise, so did the congregation. She expected support but instead was made to feel alone, ostracised.... So in her experience, she was abandoned twice. We had hours of discussion around God, faith and spirituality. In fact, she was the one who told me to read *The Shack*.

She was on a long, terminal journey and would come and go from the hospital as she declined, improved a little and declined some more. She was adamant that she wanted me there at the end and that she wanted to be anointed as she passed away.

One day, she slipped into a coma and I was called to ICU.

I stood by her bed and said a silent prayer and then I greeted her in the name of Christ. I anointed her head with a balm of healing and calming herbs. I made the sign of a cross on her forehead, prayed for her safe journey and left.

To my surprise, she appeared in the wards a week or two later. When I had last seen her, she was in a deep coma and not expected to survive the next few hours. So when I saw her sitting up in bed looking perky, I was stunned. She said, 'I knew you were there! I smelled the balm in my dreams and I held onto that. It carried me through. I felt God's presence and He never left me.' and then she thanked me.

A few months later, she died and she went willingly and in peace.

What was it that she held onto? She found her symbol of hope, companionship and healing. Companionship with the Lord overcame her sense of abandonment. Her 'symbol' was the healing balm – a smell.

In this story – the Israelites have become quarrelsome. Nostalgia’s rain has dampened memory’s soil so that what sprung up was a past *so much better* than the present. They forgot oppression and slavery but remembered food, shelter and certainty. In the old days, they knew where they were going to be tomorrow, and the day after that. Quite the opposite to their struggle with scarcity and the elusiveness of the promised Land. They accused God of infidelity and Moses of a failure of leadership.

So the Lord sent in the snakes to bring them to heal. In the metaphor of snakes, we see gossip mongers; rumour spreaders; nests of vipers (creators of elitist cliques); and shonky dealers. Snakes represent dirty politics and disinformation that can tear a community apart. There is a plague amongst them, be it biting each other or being bitten.

In desperation, they turn to Moses and admit they have sinned and ask Moses to do what Moses does – intervene: To take the snakes away...

And God tells Moses to create this thing - a symbol – to put it on a pole, to raise it up, which is where the Gospel of John takes its reference to Jesus on the Cross. (Jn 3:14-21).

The people were required, when bitten, to go to the pole and look up – and remember God. Perhaps they were forced to emerge from their self-pity and remember whose they were and whom they serve. God does not prevent illness – but offers healing and defence against anguish. No wonder, it became the symbol for the medical profession. They can’t stop injury (hence the snake is still there) but they can help heal in their case physically, not spiritually or metaphorically. Dr’s have a way of being literal.¹

The symbol was powerful. The people went from riotous to obedient. And God did not take the snakes away.

The symbol of the serpent doesn’t stop people from getting bitten just as the balm didn’t stop her from dying.

¹ I wonder whether they even teach where the symbol comes from anymore.

There's a point here where the scripture is asking for a transubstantiation. It takes the source of their fear and destruction and transforms it into a magical antidote. If you look to this symbol – you will live.

The snake on a pole prepares us for the power of the cross.

Remember, God does not kill the snakes or prevent them from biting people.

He did not remove the curse that was snapping at their heels.

The scripture doesn't say *not* bitten, doesn't say *cured* (of the curse) – just says lived. They were given a way to live with it. Something to hold onto.

In Hebrews 5:7, Christ offers his prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears. He cried out to the one who could save him from this death...but in his obedience he will be made perfect and become the source of salvation for others. His being heard by God does not mean he escapes the fear of death or bypasses the agony of the cross. Jesus has learned from human suffering.

These passages are designed to set the symbol of Christ as the sacrifice to end all sacrifice. Jesus does not ask to be saved. He embraces his human existence fully – even when that means suffering and death. He tells it like it is some natural phenomena – 'unless the grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies ...it remains just that, grain: Singular – alone.

He turns to his disciples and asked them, 'what should I say to the Father? That he be saved? No, this is the reason I have come to this hour. And in the passage God glorifies him...in other words, supports and substantiates the importance of the man for what is about to be.

And the crowd heard the thunder (or an angel – depending on who you ask.) The most important line is the next line, where Jesus says 'this voice has come for *your* sake, not for mine'.

The people need to be convinced. We need convincing.

God did not take away the suffering. We are walking towards the ultimate transubstantiation.

In the end, we will be left with the cross as a symbol. To me a symbol of protest. To you, perhaps something else.

The meaning of the cross emerges for each of us differently as we deepen our understanding of our spiritual journey. We emerge into a more open spiritual landscape that permits us room for curiosity and wondering about the nature of things.

The patient emerged from the coma changed because she felt the presence of God.

As we awaken with the shadows of our dreams –and walk in the daylight of everyday ordinariness, we also need to pay attention to sense God’s signs. What are the signs before you?

We need our voices to be loud and clear. We have to make it thunder and just as Jesus said, because ‘the voice had come for your sake, not for mine.’ There has to be a thunder of protest that forces change.

And who were the Greeks? They were the symbol that the word had gone viral: the equivalent of memes. When philosophers from far away travel to hear Jesus words, the powers that be knew he had to die. The movement was serious and spreading ever wider.

In today’s readings Jesus is facing the truth of his destiny and is not attempting to bypass suffering. He wants to be fully engaged in the finality of human existence – not hoard it away. He does not turn away but asks us one thing – to believe. To believe it is worth it. To believe in Him. A thousand tongues to sing.

Signs and symbols are a language built into human DNA – understandable at a primitive level – a level before education and before Church as we know it. I like to believe it is skywriting for the soul.

So I pray:

Jesus, I can almost hear your cries. Surprisingly your sorrow and fear comfort me in my very human existence. It is because you did not run away, I can hold you near. Walk with me through all my earthly days. May I have the courage to walk with you. Amen.