



Week four
Transforming
Gift

Transforming Life

a Lent Course for 2012

produced by the Diocese of St Albans

www.stalbans.anglican.org

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The Bible Reading

Lent 4

Numbers 21.4-9

⁴ From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. ⁵The 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.' ⁶Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. ⁷The people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.' So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸And the Lord said to Moses, 'Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.' ⁹So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

You may prefer to save paper by only reproducing pages 2 & 3 and using bibles to read the passage.

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Some Reflections

'You'd have been fed up too if you'd been through what we've been through'. So might the Israelites say to us as we come to this story. They might criticize us for our lack of faith and trust, sitting well-fed and in the comfort of our own homes. And yet, they had seen the remarkable gifts of God for their basic needs in the desert – water from the rock and the manna on the ground.

Our experience of being human is that, however much we have or do not have, we always find something to complain about. That attitude, at best, fails to take account of the many gifts showered upon us by God, and at worst, can lead us to complain that God does not care and is neglecting us.

The Israelites blame both God and Moses for their misery – and then things get worse with a plague of poisonous snakes. They are shocked into returning to the God they were rejecting. This is a real repentance – a turning around. But the snakes do not disappear as a result! Rather, a gift is provided for the people's healing. It takes an act of faith, though, to access it. A bronze serpent is set up, and whoever is bitten will live – provided they are 'willing to look up to it and receive God's gift'.

Is this magic, or superstition? No, it's a reminder that God's grace, God's covenant with his people, is not a one-way street. The human part – our part – is gratefully to acknowledge and to accept the gift of God's grace. In the narrative of St. John's gospel, Jesus seizes on this story as a powerful picture of what he is to do on the cross. 'And 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. 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.' (John 3:14-16) This doesn't happen by magic or superstition either; people must believe for themselves and come to the cross for the gift of salvation.

Historical note:

Later, during the reforms of King Hezekiah, the bronze serpent which had been taken and placed in the temple in Jerusalem, was destroyed deliberately (2 Kings 18:4). It had become an idol to which people were sacrificing – superstition and magic had taken over from faith. It had ceased to fulfil its purpose of drawing people to the grace of the one true God.

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Questions for Discussion

What is your most common complaint against God?
In what ways do you feel he has failed you? (It will be difficult to be honest in thinking about this question)

What has God blessed you with in the last month or so that you are really grateful for?

What does this story from the journeyings of the Israelites tell us about our Christian journey?

How can we prevent the helpful symbols of God's grace (churches, icons, the Bible, even the bread and wine of the Holy Communion) becoming idols?

Ideas for Action

Each person to jot down

- ◆ One thing that has struck me
- ◆ What one thing am I going to do?
- ◆ What one thing will I pray about this week?



Prayer

Spend some time in corporate silent prayer:

- come to God in sorrow for the times you have 'complained' about him
- remember all the gifts he has given you – material and spiritual – and thank him
- ask him for patience and strength for the things you find most difficult in life
- are there any 'idols' that need removing from your life?

Close

Finish by saying this collect and then the Living God's Love prayer:

Merciful Lord, you know our struggle to serve you:
when sin spoils our lives
and overshadows our hearts,
come to our aid
and turn us back to you again;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Living God, draw us deeper into your love;
Jesus our Lord, send us to care and serve;
Holy Spirit, make us heralds of good news.
Stir us, strengthen us, teach and inspire us
to live your love
with generosity and joy,
imagination and courage;
for the sake of your world
and in the name of Jesus. Amen.

