

On the Cross, what's God up to ... a magnet for all people SPH, Wednesday in Holy Week

You'll search high and low in the Bible for the word magnet, and of course, you won't find it. But you'll find the idea. And it's reflected in words we use in worship, such as

O my Saviour, lifted
From the earth for me,
Draw me, in thy mercy,
Nearer unto thee.

There is a drawing power – an attractiveness – about the cross. It attracts us as surely as a magnet attracts iron filings. And William Walsham Howe goes on in a later verse

Lift my earth-bound longings,
Fix them, Lord, above;
Draw me with the magnet
Of thy mighty love.

He – we – take our cue from this word of Jesus:

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.

And if you're not a doctor, familiar with the BMA's logo, you might wonder what it's all about.

Well, we're back to the Exodus and a little bit after the making of the Covenant which we were thinking about yesterday. The Israelites were grumbling, actually quite noisily, complaining about both Moses and God. And God's response was often just as vigorous in return. On one occasion

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.'

(They're talking about manna – which must have been a bit like existing on a diet on communion wafers or rice biscuits. Delish, as Jamie probably wouldn't say).

Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many ...died.

(Oh dear! So what happens?)

The people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us. And 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. So 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.

Now this may sound like a piece of bizarre nonsense. But it's in the record; and the bronze serpent became a key feature of the temple for several centuries. So what's the point? The point is that the purpose of the bronze serpent was to save people.

They wanted to be saved from the serpents. And so the bronze serpent was set up on a pole for all to see and live, to see and to be saved.

But when does Jesus talk about this? It's part of his explanation of himself and his purpose to Nicodemus. And what follows is this

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.

At once we see that the purpose for which the Son of Man is to be lifted up is God's saving purpose. And God's saving purpose is the expression of God's love. God loves the world so much that he gives his only Son. In the lifted up the Son of Man, in the lifted up Jesus, God is drawing us in, attracting us by the love.

Adore the God who draws us with the magnet of love.

There's another passage in John's Gospel which also uses this image of lifting up, of attraction, of the magnet.

'Now my soul is troubled (says Jesus). And what should I say – "Father, save me from this hour"? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.' Then a voice came from heaven, 'I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again. The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Other said, 'An angel has spoken to him.' Jesus answered, 'This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgement of this world; now the ruler of the world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself.' He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

This is even more direct. No oblique references to the Son of Man. Just straight: 'when I am lifted up.' This is six days before Passover; right on top of the Passion. And just to be clear about it, John adds 'He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.'

Adore the God who is prepared to die for you.

In pointing to what is going to happen, in talking about being lifted up, Jesus is talking about crucifixion. Any cross we look at we see upright. We forget how literal the lifting up language is. When someone was crucified, the cross was laid flat on the ground. Then the person was tied to it, nailed to it – whatever. Finally, it was raised from the horizontal to the vertical. Jesus, on his cross, was literally lifted up from the earth

O my Saviour, lifted
From the earth for me ...
Draw me with the magnet
Of thy mighty love.

Adore the God who draws us with the magnet of love.

But there's something else, something more sombre. There's a strong link with judgement. 'Now is the judgement of this world' is what Jesus says when he uses this picture just before the Passion. And the conversation with Nicodemus goes on to talk about judgement as well.

We're not very keen on judgement these days. That's partly because we don't seem able to hold together two aspects of God's character. We understand his love. We don't seem to be able to reconcile his love with his anger or his wrath.

We are right in having such difficulties. Yet from a human point of view we are most certainly at fault: we often turn our back on God; we often go our own way. But God still loves us, still loves the world. And that is why the lifting up is so closely linked with both judgement and love. The judgement is the judgement of love. The crucifixion is the stretching out of the arms of love. As one of the eucharistic prayers so powerfully puts it: 'He opened wide his arms for us on the cross. He put an end to death by dying for us.'

Adore the God whose arms of love are open even to us.

On the cross, God shows us how much God loves the world, how much he wants to save the world, how much God wants to bring the world back to God. It is God incarnate on the cross, God made one of us whom we crucify. Because God loves us, God lets us do the worst we possibly can to God even as he reaches out his blood-spattered, nail-pierced hands of love to us on the cross.

The magnet: God's power of love that draws us irresistibly to God.

Adore the God who draws us with the magnet of love

O Jesus, suffering in our mortal world,
give us the single eye to see thee plain;
for blind with sin and self are those who see thee not,
as the Cross stands amid the suffering of the world today.

Hail, holy Cross, life-giving Tree,
our only hope,
and our most bitter shame.
Hail, holy cross, which bears the living Lord.

Love reigns lifted above the world –
darkness above, the trembling earth beneath.

God gives, and I must give in love to answer love
that I may be bound fast within the tree of life
to bear his fruit.