

Reading: John 3:14-21

In our modern world signs are very important and I like the one outside of the Cafe Royal Bar: 'Every loaf of bread is a tragic story of grains that didn't become beer.'

Or the washing instructions on a jersey: 'Give it to your mother, she knows what to do.'

One house I visited had the sign: 'Forget the dog, beware the kids.'

And from a building: 'In case of fire, exit the building before tweeting about it.'

Today's readings speak to us of signs.

John in his Gospel is using an Old Testament sign that would have very quickly resonated with his original audience. '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.'

The source of this allusion is found in our Old Testament reading in Chapter 21 of the book of Numbers. We find there the story of the people of God grumbling. It wouldn't happen at St Peter's! But they have so grumbled against Moses and God that they are being punished by a plague of poisonous snakes. As a remedy, God told Moses to cast a bronze snake and lift it up on a pole. Anyone who gazed on it was healed. The bronze snake, then, is a symbol of salvation. And we are familiar with the bronze snake as a symbol of healing on the sides of ambulances and nurses badges.

But how can such a thing be possible? Bronze was for the ancient Hebrews cutting edge technology. It had only just been invented. It was as if by seeing what they feared most, the poison was removed. We are familiar with some of our cutting edge technology doing the same. A vaccine is a small taster of what can poison us, and through it we can be healed.

The gospel offers us today, a sign like the bronze snake, only this one is the cross of Christ. I like to pray gazing at the cross with Jesus on it. I know some Christians are uncomfortable having the figure of Christ on it, but it serves to remind me how much God loves me. A love so great that he didn't spare his own beloved son. This is how St John is thinking in our Gospel too. Verse 16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life."

Psychologists tell us that what the human race fears most is death. This is our primeval fear. By gazing on the cross of Christ, lifted up for us, the fear of death is removed. This is because, through Jesus death, we have been given eternal life. We are healed from the poison of death.

But there is another poison which afflicts us, a poison that the Cross is the antidote for. The pain of human suffering. "If only there was someone who understood what I am going through," we tell ourselves. Whether it's the pain of a broken relationship, or an illness, or a dream shattered or a job lost or a grief. All of us have or have known pain in our lives. As we gaze on the face of the crucified Christ, lifted up for us, we see the pain of suffering. We see God suffering with us and for us. We cannot, in my experience, hold the gaze of the crucified Jesus for very long and not see his pain and his love, and this is healing.

Some years ago, some deep sea divers located a 400 year old ship off the coast of northern Ireland. They delighted to swim among its decks, all the treasure laid out before them. Among the many extraordinarily valuable items was a man's wedding ring. When it was taken to the

surface and cleaned up they noticed an inscription on it. Etched on the wide band was a hand holding a heart. Under the etching was this inscription, "I have nothing more to give you."

Of all the treasures on that ship, none moved the divers more than that ring and the beautiful etching.

The words of that ring, "I have nothing more to give you" could have been written on the cross of Jesus because, on the cross, Jesus gave us everything he had. He gave us his love, he gave us his life, he gave us all that one person could give another. He had nothing more to give us. That inscription could also serve as a powerful summary of what God has done in Jesus Christ as we read it in today's Gospel: . "I have nothing more to give you."

A question: Can you gaze at the cross and not feel God's love for you? I know I can't.

There was another ship which went down off the coast of Scotland. Still filled with people the divers couldn't explain why everyone was still seated and had made no effort to save themselves. Then they saw the sign. Pay as you leave!

John is right. The Cross is the sign for all times. When we gaze on the cross of Christ, it has healing power. We see a Saviour who knows what it is to suffer. In Jesus we have a Saviour who can identify with our pain. Whatever it is we are going through, he can understand. And this is healing. When we gaze on the cross of Christ it has healing power because we know that the sting of death has been taken away by Jesus' death. Death, our greatest fear, has been removed from us. By Jesus' resurrection we have the promise of eternal life. As we gaze on Jesus, we see a Saviour who loves us with a love stronger than any kind of death.

Many times though in my ministry I have found it helpful to have wooden handheld crosses to give to people. I have given them to people who are terminally ill, women who are having a difficult pregnancy or people who are undergoing a painful relationship break up. There is something helpful about having a tangible sign. Something we can gaze at or hold, a living symbol if you like. People always tell me how helpful they find these crosses and I never get them back.

And so let us look at the sign. Let us gaze on it for a while and be healed. Isaac Watts put it best...

*When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.*

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.*