

Sermon at Brecon Cathedral

Saturday, 19 September 2015 at 11.00am

Readings: Numbers 21.4-9/Philippians 2.6-11/John 3. 13-17

Dean of Brecon: The Very Revd Dr Paul Shackerley

‘Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believed in him may have eternal life’ (John 3.14)

I appreciate there is another JC political celebrity who could dominate the pulpit this morning. However, I am going to focus on a messianic JC. Today we mark Holy Cross Day. It's a bit like having Good Friday in the middle of the ordinary time.

In preparing the sermon, I have been making connections. Today, we mark the foundation of the Diocese and Cathedral. It is also a significant marker for me as your Dean. A year ago I was installed as the Dean. The day following my installation I reflected on my first sermon and year in office. My first sermon outlined the need to manage our resources responsibly as custodians that we will secure the Cathedral's future. I hope that I have nurtured a culture of trust, attentive listening and creativity. How do we exhibit the values of trust, listening and responsibility? How do we work together with honesty, yet without excessive disclosure of personal agendas? How can we disagree, yet respond with graciousness and attentive listening, rather than blaming others when we don't get things right? Well, we take responsibility for our actions, decisions and behaviour. I also said in the first sermon that we must look after each other and tolerate each other's foibles and peculiarities with humor, laughter and grace. In my first year, I can honestly say, I think these values have been applied among those I have worked with.

Alongside making this annual connection, I have made connections with today's Scripture. Making connections help us gain meaning as Christian disciples, but also gain a deeper understanding of what it means to be human beings. When I was writing my PhD I was taught by my supervisor that, in theology and philosophy, always look for themes and trajectories, and in between use story to root them in reality to help give meaning. Well, today's Scriptures give us a clear theme and trajectory from the book of Numbers to the Gospel of John. That theme is the healing power of the cross.

‘Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believed in him may have eternal life’ (John 3.14)

There is a legend about Moses' rod and bronze serpent that help us make connections between today's readings. It was written by the Syrian Solomon. Solomon was a 13th

Century bishop of Iraq, who wrote a collection of theological texts. According to the legend Moses' staff was a fragment of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil recorded in Genesis. The rod was passed down to future generations, Shem, Judah, Pharez ancestor of David and so on. After Pharez's death an angel carried it to the mountains of Moab and buried it there, where it was found by Jethro. When Moses, at Jethro's request, went in search of it, the rod was brought to him by an angel. With this staff Aaron and Moses performed all the miracles. Joshua received it from Moses and made use of it in his wars; and Joshua, in turn, delivered it to Phinehas, who buried it in Jerusalem. There it remained hidden until the birth of Jesus, when the place of its concealment was revealed to Joseph, who took it with him on the journey to Egypt. Judas Iscariot stole it from James, brother of Jesus, who had received it from Joseph. At Jesus' crucifixion the Jews had no wood for the transverse beam of the cross, so Judas produced the staff for that purpose.

The context of the Hebrew Scripture, the book of Numbers is the wilderness. Aaron has died and once again we have trouble in the camp. And, today's stories encourages us to look in two directions, Moses and Jesus. The people were hungry, tired and irritated and 'their eyes were pulled away from God', which led them to grumble and complain. Numbers is the last in a series of complaints by the people. In their grumbles they say 'let's go back to Egypt'. It's an all too familiar complaint, those who hanker for the past, conveniently forgetting that it wasn't all that wonderful really. The past looks familiar and safe compared with the challenges of the present. Well, that comes and bites them, literally. Snakes bite them and they begin to die. So, they plead to Moses to intervene. Moses is instructed to put the snake on a pole, and everyone who looks at it will live. 'Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believed in him may have eternal life' (John 3.14)

Moses and Aaron, often seen as co-leaders of Israel from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land, shows one effective leader, Moses, against Aaron, the ineffective leader.¹ Their leadership and character exhibits the juxtaposition of keeping the status quo with moving forward. Aaron preserves the peace. He negotiates his 'pseudo self' and ends up emotionally fused with the congregation, pandering to emotional pressures. Aaron abrogated his leadership and responsibility, taking the soft option for peace at all cost. Moses has a more 'solid self'. He is thoughtful and courageous and

¹ Peter L. Steinke, *Congregational Leadership in Anxious Times: Being Calm and Courageous no Matter What* (Hendon, Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2006).

accepts the challenges. 'Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believed in him may have eternal life' (John 3.14)

The role of the new Chapter is to work with the congregation, staff and key partners, not to look back or complain, not fusing with those who block necessary progress, but taking the model of Moses to work together to address our challenges, rather than seeking the easy option shown by Aaron. Moses was bold enough to argue thoughtfully with God (Exodus 4.10). And, when God is disgusted with the Israelites in the desert, God changes them because Moses intercedes for them. At the heart of service then, is intercessory prayer, for each other and the world. Moses rises to the challenge. He has the ability to stay connected, when others were emotionally upset, uncertain, or looked to the past for comfort. He was grounded in relationship with the God who called him to lead. Moses was willing to adapt, whereas Aaron was keen only to survive. This is the task before us as a Chapter, Ministry Areas, across the Diocese in all our churches, including the Cathedral.

This Cathedral needs a responsiveness to the challenges and opportunities of the changing social and visitor landscape around us. We have a rich heritage of stories in stone and artefacts that tell the story of our ancestors' relationship with God. Even though our resources are moribund, our gifts and capabilities are extensive. Between us, Chapter members make up 361 years of accumulative experience of ministry. Of which 78 of those years have been served by two priests.

We have a Chapter to govern and lead resources for sustainable mission and ministry. What is clear to me, and hopefully to Chapter, is our need to respond with openness to adaptation and responsiveness to the opportunities not yet realised, and ensure we are not, like Aaron, guided by complaint and emotional pressures. Our unique position as the Bishop's focus of unity for the Diocese, is the unitary nature of Christ's mission in this part of God's kingdom where we serve

This Cathedral is an amazing sacred gift where we feed on the bread of life and where we become friends and pilgrims of Christ journeying together. One thing of the essence of who we are, and that is to be a holy space to meet with God in sacred worship.

'Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believed in him may have eternal life' (John 3.14)

The Jewish Scripture from the book of Numbers relate to the he desert wanderings. The people are attacked by snakes and Moses raises up the bronze serpent. It is a surprising survival in the Old Testament. Such potentially idolatrous images were frowned on by the compilers of the OT but this one survives. And it links directly to the gospel. John picks it up and compares the raising of the bronze serpent, and people looking on it to be healed, with Jesus raised up on the cross.

Whenever you gaze on the cross on the chapel altar or the one suspended over the altar in the Nave, be reminded that "God who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, (whatever the

source of snake bites we may have suffered), made us alive together with Christ..." That is the symbol of the journey we are making. And despite the challenges all along the way, our symbol proclaims the good news that God still loves the world. "And whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live." You may very likely encounter snake bites along your journey. Keep your eyes on the cross and live.

Total: 361 years of accumulative experience of ministry. Of which 78 of those years have been served by two priests.

There is a legend about Moses' rod and bronze serpent. It was written by the Syrian Solomon. Solomon was a 13th Century bishop of Iraq. He wrote a collection of theological texts about heaven, creation, earth, angels, paradise, OT Patriarchs and resurrection. According to the legend Moses' staff was a fragment of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil recorded in Genesis. The rod was passed down to future generations, Shem, Judah, Pharez ancestor of David and of the Messiah. After Pharez's death an angel carried it to the mountains of Moab and buried it there, where the pious Jethro found it. When Moses, at Jethro's request, went in search of it, the rod was brought to him by an angel. With this staff Aaron and Moses performed all the miracles. Joshua received it from Moses and made use of it in his wars; and Joshua, in turn, delivered it to Phinehas, who buried it in Jerusalem.

There it remained hidden until the birth of Jesus, when the place of its concealment was revealed to Joseph, who took it with him on the journey to Egypt. Judas Iscariot stole it from James, brother of Jesus, who had received it from Joseph. At Jesus' crucifixion the Jews had no wood for the transverse beam of the cross, so Judas produced the staff for that purpose.

The R.A.M.C motto is ;

'In Arduis Fidelis' translated as 'Faithful in Adversity'

In [Greek mythology](#), the **Rod of Asclepius** (☰),^[1] also known as the **Staff of Asclepius** (sometimes also spelled **Asklepios** or **Aesculapius**) and as the **asklepian**,^[2] is a serpent-entwined rod wielded by the Greek god [Asclepius](#), a deity associated with healing and medicine. The symbol has continued to be used in modern times, where it is associated with medicine and health care, yet frequently confused with the staff of the god [Hermes](#), the [caduceus](#). Theories have been proposed about the Greek origin

of the symbol and its implications. **Asclepius** ([/æˈskliːpiəs/](#); [Greek](#): Ἀσκληπιός, *Asklēpiós* [[asklɛːpiós](#)]; [Latin](#): *Aesculapius*) was a god of [medicine](#) in ancient [Greek religion](#) and [mythology](#). Asclepius represents the healing aspect of the medical arts; his daughters are [Hygieia](#) ("Hygiene", the goddess/personification of health, cleanliness, and sanitation), [Iaso](#) (the goddess of recuperation from illness), [Aceso](#) (the goddess of the healing process), [Aglæa/Ægle](#) (the goddess of beauty, splendor, glory, magnificence, and adornment), and [Panacea](#) (the goddess of universal remedy). He was associated with the Roman/Etruscan god [Vediovis](#). He was one of [Apollo's](#) sons, sharing with Apollo the epithet *Paeon* ("the Healer").^[1] The [rod of Asclepius](#), a snake-entwined staff, remains a symbol of medicine today. Those physicians and attendants who served this god were known as the [Therapeutae of Asclepius](#).

Some commentators have linked the symbol to the [Nehushtan](#), a sacred object consisting of a serpent wrapped around a pole mentioned in the [Bible](#) in the [Book of Numbers](#) (Numbers 21:5–9).^{[17][18][19][20]} The section in the Book of Numbers reads as follows:

5 And the people spake against God, and against Moses, Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? for there is no bread, neither is there any water; and our soul loatheth this light bread. 6 And the Lord sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and much people of Israel died. 7 Therefore the people came to Moses, and said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord, and against thee; pray unto the Lord, that he take away the serpents from us. And Moses prayed for the people. 8 And the Lord said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live. 9 And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived.^[21]

—*King James Bible*.

King Hezekiah later destroyed the copper serpent because it was being worshiped and had existed for 700 years (2Kings 18:4).

This is consistent with the claim in the New Testament of the Bible that Jesus also delivers believers from eternal death in the passage found in John 3:14–15.

14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: 15 That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.^[21]

Aaron's rod, however, is cited twice as exhibiting miraculous power on its own, when not physically in the grasp of its owner. In [Exodus 7](#) ([Parshat Va'eira](#) in the [Torah](#)), [God](#) sends Moses and Aaron to [Pharaoh](#) once more, instructing Aaron that when Pharaoh demands to see a miracle, he is to "cast down his rod" and it will become a [serpent](#).

Thus, the Midrash [Yelammedenu](#) states that:

the staff with which Jacob crossed the Jordan is identical with that which Judah gave to his daughter-in-law, Tamar ([Genesis](#) 32:10, 38:18). It is likewise the holy rod with which Moses worked (Exodus 4:20, 21), with which Aaron performed wonders before Pharaoh (Exodus 7:10), and with which, finally, David slew the giant Goliath (I [Samuel](#) 17:40). David left it to his descendants, and the Davidic kings used it as a scepter until the destruction of the Temple, when it miraculously disappeared. When the Messiah comes it will be given to him for a scepter in token of his authority over the heathen.

Christian use[[edit](#)]



Hunt of the Unicorn Annunciation (ca. 1500) from a Netherlandish [book of hours](#). In the [hortus conclusus](#), [Gideon](#)'s fleece is worked in, and the altar at the rear has Aaron's rod that miraculously flowered in the centre. Both are [types](#) for the Annunciation.^[1]

The account of the blossoming of Aaron's Rod contained in Clement's first letter to the Corinthians (ep. 43) is quite in haggadic-midrashic style, and must probably be ascribed to Jewish or, more strictly speaking, Jewish-Hellenistic sources. According to that account, Moses placed upon each of the twelve staffs the corresponding seal of the head of a tribe. The doors of the sanctuary were similarly sealed, to prevent anyone from having access to the rods at night.

The early Christian scholar Origen wrote of the rod, 'This rod of Moses, with which he subdued the Egyptians, is the symbol of the cross of Jesus, who conquered the world.'