

The life of God

# CRACKED WIDE OPEN

Diocesan Lent Course 2021

in the paschal mystery

The suffering, death, resurrection  
and glorification of Jesus

Diocese of Chichester Lent Course 2021

**Week Four**  
**Bible Notes**

# The Gospel for the 4th Sunday of Lent

---

## (John 3. 14-21):

---

John 3:14-21

14 And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 16 "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. 17 "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. 18 Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. 19 And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. 20 For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21 But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

### Notes for Bible Study

This is one of the best known and most loved passages of the New Testament. Martin Luther is said to have called it 'the Gospel in miniature.' The context is Jesus' discussion with a Pharisee, Nicodemus, ('a leader of the Jews') who (significantly!) came to him 'by night.' Jesus tells him that he, Jesus, can speak with authority, testifying to what he has seen (because he is the Word of the Father, who has become flesh, c.f. John 1. 14). As the Son of Man who has come down from heaven – yet is always still in heaven with the Father – he can speak the truth. That truth is the message of God's redeeming love and his desire to grant us the gift of eternal life with him.

### Lift high the Cross!

Jesus points to an event recorded in the Scriptures that would have been well known by Nicodemus, the time in the desert when the Hebrews were afflicted by poisonous (or 'fiery') serpents because they had complained against God:

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. 5 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." 6 Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. 7 The 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. 8 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." 9 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.'

Jesus tells Nicodemus that just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert so the Son of Man will be lifted up – as we will celebrate very soon during Holy Week and in the great three days of Christ's death and resurrection. Lifting up is a key theme in John's story of Jesus. He tells the same story as the other three Evangelists but seems to see further and deeper into the mystery.

For John, Christ's crucifixion *is already* his exaltation – even before the resurrection! He did not forget the great prophecy of Isaiah about the mysterious 'suffering servant' of the Lord (Jesus, who was to come): See, my servant shall prosper; he shall be exalted and lifted up and shall be very high (Isaiah 52.13)'.

A good commentary on this wonderful mystery of life through death, and of crucifixion as triumph, are the *Common Worship* prayers for *Holy Cross Day* on the 14th of September (known in other traditions as the 'The Exaltation of the Cross'):

*The tree of shame was made the tree of glory; and where life was lost, there life has been restored...*

*And again,*

*An instrument of shameful death has become for Christ a throne of glory. The power of the life-giving cross reveals the judgement that has come upon the world and the triumph of Christ crucified.*

John's Jesus assures us that just as the suffering Israelites looked up to the serpent and were healed, if we gaze on Jesus lifted high on the cross, we too will be healed and saved – not from any earthly poison but from the poison of sin and death. It is a tremendously consoling message: no matter how hard or incomprehensible the suffering,

through the death and resurrection of Jesus (which reveals God's love), the light of hope is shining. Not only is suffering not the end – but the suffering itself is filled with glory!

## The Pain of Division

However the teaching of Jesus is anything but sentimental. It is a hard Gospel too. Because the light has come, because absolute love has been revealed, the possibility arises of saying no to God. Just because such a light is shining, the darkness is ever more visible. Therefore for Christians, preaching and living the Gospel are not minor matters. To proclaim the Good News is a message of life and death for the world. Yet in our zeal we must never lose sight of the heart of the message: God so loved the world that he gave his only Son!

## Lives Shaped by the Cross

The entire Christian life – of communities and believers – is shaped by the mystery of Christ's cross (which means death *and* resurrection!).

- In the Eucharist, through Holy Communion, we proclaim the power of Christ's death until he comes again in glory (I Corinthians 11.26); we share in the marriage supper of the Lamb, the banquet of the Kingdom of God (Revelation 19.9); we share by faith in the person of Christ; we receive the Holy Spirit.

This is more than just a call to worship in church – to visit a 'holy enclave' once a week; and as St. Paul saw clearly, nor is it simply a matter of individual piety', of cultivating a relationship between 'Jesus and me' (crucial though that is). It is a call to us as a community to engage in something much bigger – enabling God to bring in the Kingdom by our living out the Gospel of love. Dying to sin and living to God's glory we are to share that message with those around us, in and out of church. We are to become salt and light for others (Matthew 5. 13-16), so that they will glorify God for the love that is revealed. Paul recognised that offering our very selves to God is a call to service (Romans 12).

- In baptism we are plunged into the mystery of his dying and rising (c.f. Romans 6. 3-14 and Colossians 2. 11-15) – called to live a new life as the Christian community, in and for the world.

## Study Questions

- How do I view the cross of Christ – as a sign of triumphant love?
- What difference does it make to me that I have been plunged into the death and resurrection of Christ and am fed with his living presence in Scripture and in Holy Communion?
- How can I and my community really be light and salt for today's society?
- Where is the cross in my life – and how does it reveal God's glory?

## Collect for Contemplating

### the Cross of Christ

Almighty God,  
who in the passion of your blessed Son made an instrument of painful death to be for us the means of life and peace: grant us so to glory in the cross of Christ that we may gladly suffer for his sake; who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

## Collects for the 4th Sunday of

### Lent

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.

Lord God, whose blessed Son our Saviour gave his back to the smiters and did not hide his face from shame: give us grace to endure the sufferings of this present time with sure confidence in the glory that shall be revealed; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

