

John 3:16

Wherever you go, people complain about the management. The way that work is run, the way that the family is run, the way that church is run – we all know, if we were in charge – everything would be so much better! It's a natural part of life – I have never been a part of any institution where people don't complain about the way it's run. A few weeks ago, Stefan, my five year old, was asking for food. And being only a few minutes from tea time, he stamped his feet and said – "I'm leaving this family!" That was almost precisely the behaviour that was displayed by the Hebrew people out there in the desert.

Israel, was quite an institution. Those naughty Hebrews, complaining, grumbling. What did they have to grumble about? Apart from being displaced, having no food, not knowing where their next meal was coming from, walking miles every day, not knowing where they were going, wandering through the wilderness in blistering heat, apart from those minor inconveniences, what did they have to grumble about?

And we have this bizarre story. Because the Hebrews were wishing they were back in Egypt, God sends snakes to bite them and kill them. But, when they repent, God tells Moses to make a snake and put it up on a pole. Anyone who looks at the snake will then be allowed to live! It all seems like a bit of an odd story. But it is one that is taken up by Jesus himself in the Gospel reading.

Jesus says that just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. And its interesting that the word here for being lifted up is related both to the crucifixion and to the ascension of Jesus. The verb for the condemned Jesus being hoisted up onto the cross is that same verb for lifting up. The verb used to describe the vindicated, resurrected Jesus, ascending to sit at the right hand of God.

And looking to this Jesus is the means of access to the new era of God's blessing, life in the true promised land, eternal life – the age in which the world is put to rights. It's not talking about life in heaven, as is often imagined. That is not how a first century Jew would understand eternal life. In the first instance, it is the time when life is as it was always meant to be. And part of that is a life from which death is excluded. The era of resurrection. Not necessarily about life in some distant place called heaven.

Stefan recently heard that a friend of mine had died. And his reaction was, well, if he's gone to heaven – it's only about a mile away. I know, because I've seen a map of space. And if we want to go to heaven, we just need to get a rocket man to take us there! Of course, it's ridiculous, but its closer to the biblical idea of heaven than we may realise. The bible never talks of a heaven to which we go when we die. Death is not about us going to be with God. Eternal life, is the final arrival of the era when God comes to live with us. Heaven comes to earth, the new Jerusalem descends from heaven. A new heaven and a new earth. Not, the dwelling place of men is with God: but the dwelling place of God is with men.

And it is by looking to this Jesus, as by looking at this serpent, our attention is drawn away from our immediate circumstances, to the wider purposes of God. A reminder that our present circumstances are not the final word on who we are and where we end up. We are on a journey.

Now, for many people, the language of being on a journey is so trendy that it is becoming repulsive. Because many people are not on a journey. Many people are not journeying towards a future of justice. Tim will say a little in a few minutes about *the Jobs Justice and Climate* march in London this Saturday. Given the present economic crisis that engulfs so much of the globe, there is a tendency amongst many to try to conserve what we have, for nations to conserve what they have – like the Israelites, trying to gather up the manna, the heavenly bread and store it. Rather than the risk of journeying towards an economic way of being that is fair for all. If our present systems benefit us, and our present lifestyle works well for us, what need is there of a journey?

But the Hebrews were in the desert. The old testament reading began with the reminder that the people were on a journey. But it cannot be assumed that we are on a journey, especially if everything is going well for us. And the notion of being on a journey is implicit in the New Testament reading: the verse that we decorate with a beautiful picture of a sunset: John 3:16 – God so loved the world, that he sent his only son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. We all know what that means – that God loves everyone, and all you need to do in order to avoid perishing in the fires of hell, is to give your mental assent and your emotional agreement, that Jesus Christ once existed. And hey presto – eternal life.

But the call to believe does not mean that we have to forever offer our academic assent to these facts about Jesus. The call to believe comes in the present continuous tense – the call is to go on believing – to go on trusting – the implication is that there is a journey that we are walking, that we are disciples on the way, that belief is a daily part of the journey to eternal life.

Interestingly, this famous text about eternal life is our lectionary reading on a week that is marked by two high profile funerals. The first funeral is that for the planet.

And what does Jesus mean when he talks about the ‘world’? The world that is used might be better translated as universe. The Greek word that is used, is Cosmos. It is not only the people of the world – but God loved the Cosmos that he sent his only Son. And our cosmos is in a mess. In fact, in Coventry this week, a funeral was held for our cosmos. Some of our members attended that funeral. Increasingly, the possibility of halting a 2 percent rise in global temperatures appears to have passed. Increasingly it looks as though runaway climate change has for so long been denied, so long been the subject of talk rather than action, that we have missed our chance. Our efforts now should be taken up trying to brace ourselves for the inevitable impact.

In fact, there are some environmentalists who interpret the current economic crisis as a good thing. At least in the West, the slow down of the economy means fewer cars being produced than at any point in the recorded history of car production. Airline companies have been badly hit by the recession, so flights are more expensive and there are fewer of them. Consumer – have you ever stopped to think about that word as a description of a human being – consumer spending is down, and so too are many of the dangerous impacts of human spending. So, at some levels, the whole economy slowing down is a good thing – because despite the fact that life is becoming very difficult for millions of people, at least it may offer some hope of the saving the lives of millions of people by reducing the damage being inflicted upon the planet. So, you can understand how, for many people – this economic disaster might be regarded as a good thing, perhaps even a gift from God to future generations

of human beings who might not otherwise live in the cosmos that God so loved he sent his only son.

But rarely is a story that straightforward. A slow down in the world economy, the running low of oil reserves, does not necessarily mean that we pollute less. The possibility of re-opening coal mines would be disastrous environmentally, but is being spoken about increasingly to try to re-inject life into some of the places that suffered so badly when our coal mines were closed. Globally, as well, when a nation's economy is threatened, the result tends not to be greater global co-operation among nations. Far more likely is a retreat from world affairs, a protectionism, that leaves concerns for others off the radar altogether. Who cares what happens to families living in Bangladesh, when my family's wellbeing is threatened? So what if coal has damaging impacts upon others – it can't be a bad thing if it gives me a wage! There is no journeying here. Just protective, conservatism.

It's a scary thing to see the world in such a mess, economically and ecologically. What can we do? Politically, we can tighten our border control. We can complain about foreigners ruining our economy; which is precisely what my plumber did yesterday as he made his eighty pounds for fifteen minutes' work! Or it can mean that we are on a genuine journey.

Personally, we are reminded to look to this Jesus. The funeral for the plant is not the only one that will make news headlines this week. Many of you will know about Jade Goody, the young Essex mother made famous by reality tv because of her ignorance. Well, she was very young. She believed that the part of the country where I live, East Anglar, was a place you had to fly to ... from Essex! But people fell in love with this woman, who was not as stupid as people assumed. And when she developed cancer it aroused enormous media interest and overwhelming public sympathy. Well, she died peacefully in her sleep this morning, on mother's day. And the reaction of many people to her death was not the kind of safe distance mourning that we saw following the death of the beautiful princess twelve years ago. Reality TV had thrust death, the ultimate reality, into the consciousness of those who dare not think about it.

Much as we turn our nose up at reality tv, and at celebrities who become famous simply for being famous, circumstances have shown put death, the one thing that we don't want to talk about, right into the consciousness of a culture that cannot usually cope with it. Right up to the end, this young woman allowed cameras to film the reality of death as it gradually engulfed her. Death, the ultimate full stop. The end of a journey. Papers will probably describe her death as the moment she lost her battle with cancer! But the awareness of our ultimate destiny reawakens an awareness of the preciousness of human life every day here and now. This has been used by many biblical authors, and many of the great philosophers of history.

When we look at this one tragic story, which is one among many, but one that is starkly narrated for us – it speaks of the tragedies that beset our world. Equally, when we look with despair at the economic and ecological state of our planet – it is easy to allow doom and gloom to engulf our perspective. And from such a place, what does it mean to look up at the serpent on the stick, to look up at the rabbi on the cross, to look up at the Son of Man seated at the right hand of God. What does it mean to go on believing in this figure?

Is it simply a call to otherworldliness – to think, well God loves the world so much he's going to lift us up out of it into some better place we call heaven? That the world is so awful we just

need to be rescued from it? Everything is very bad, but just focus on Jesus and you'll feel better, he will immunise you from the pain until such a time as everything ends and then you can begin your enjoyment of eternal life!?! Probably not.

Whether the funeral is for a young mother, or for the planet as a whole. That funeral is not the end of the story. Whether we are living with the Hebrew people in the desert, or living with the Jews of Jesus' day under the oppression of an empire, death is a reality that surrounds us. And it is in precisely these contexts that we are reminded to look to this crucified Jesus, this risen Jesus, this ascended Jesus, this Jesus, lifted up like the snake in the desert.

But not just to observe him as a feel-good spectacle to numb the pain of death. But to go on believing in him in the midst of this world of death.

Not only to receive eternal life, but to mediate it here and now.

Not to freewheel through a world of pain into a brighter eternity, but to be an outpost of that brighter eternity here and now.

Not to use the world as our ash tray because it's doomed to destruction, but to live the life of eternity here and now, so that the heaven we believe in becomes a reality here on earth.

And above all, not to be swamped by our circumstances and throw our hands up in despair, but to look to this Jesus, the living demonstration of just how much God so loved the Cosmos.