

Thought for the Week

Thought for the Week is based on one of the day's lectionary readings.

For the Bible online, go to: <http://bible.oremus.org/>

Choose your version (we use NRSV in church)

Copy and paste the reference into the search box and the passage will be displayed.

Wednesday 15th September

Numbers 21.4-9

Yesterday was Holy Cross Day and the gospel acclamation words are:

We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you,

because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.

It seems deeply ironic that an instrument of torture and death should become a means of life and salvation, much less have a day dedicated to thanksgiving for it. It did take a long time for the cross to become the main symbol of the Christian faith – crucifixion was such a shameful death – but today we take this for granted. There is more to this symbol of death than meets the eye, and today's reading picks up a mysterious echo from the Old Testament which Jesus refers to when he says to Nicodemus, *"As Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the wilderness, so I, the Son of Man, must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in me will have eternal life"*. Later, Jesus said *'I, if I am lifted up, will draw all people to me'*.

The serpent on a pole will be familiar to all as a symbol of the medical profession. Greek mythology tells the story of Aesculapius, who used snakes in his healing practice. There were serpent cults all over the Middle East in ancient times.

What connection there is between the cult, mythology, and the biblical story of Moses and the serpents is not clear.

The Israelites were in the wilderness and as usual, were complaining about everything, including the food. Now came a problem of snakes, with a poisonous bite.

The people recognized that their sinfulness had brought them into this predicament, so they repented and asked Moses to pray for them, which he did. God told Moses to *'Make a replica of a poisonous snake and attach it to the top of a pole. Those who are bitten will live if they look at it!'*. The result was astounding. Those who looked at the pole in obedience to God, and in dependence on God were healed. A symbol of death brought life.

Apparently, Moses' snake on a pole was preserved for future generations. In the time of Hezekiah, it became an object of idolatrous worship. It's an age-old problem of substituting an aid to worship in place of the one to be worshiped. We too can fall into this mistake if we hold too highly any object used in worship or indeed any form of worship or liturgy. However precious this may be, it's a means to an end, not the end in itself. The cross reminds us of Christ. The altar reminds us of the

sacrament. Our favourite liturgy or type of religious music – these things are an aid to worship, no more.

When Jesus spoke to Nicodemus, he was repeating an ancient principle of blessing. The Israelites were healed as they responded to God in trust and obedience. It is God who heals both body and soul in response to faith and obedience, in the context of God's eternal plan. And both then and now, God uses both modern medicine and prayer to do it!