**SERMON FOR LENT 4 | 14.03.2021 at 8am**

**Numbers 21: 4-9; Ephesians 2: 1-10; St John 3: 14-21**

**It is a full three months since we were in Church together at an 8am. Despite my optimistic hopes in the January Arena news-sheet, the post-Christmas Covid figures were bleak and we had no sooner watched the Epiphany storming of the Capitol building in Washington and Vice President Mike Pence being unceremoniously ushered out of the Senate, than the call came from the Mayor of London for us to be shuffled out of our churches and for a second major lock-down to be imposed.**

**Now there is a new President and vice-President - and there is a new landscape here too. I can’t quite put my finger on it but the world does seem a very different place than in January. Workwise, for many of us connected with the parish it has been a period of intense activity – the installation of broadband and the web cams has been far more complicated than expected; the preparation of the Consistory far more emotionally draining. Interestingly not even the wall to wall coverage of the stresses and strains within the Royal Family have quelled the new hope of the end to the pandemic through the rolling out of the vaccination programme – and yet both of these things have had the effect of making our return today a return to a different landscape. This is not where we were on January 3rd when the Three Kings were added to the Nativity scene. We have all been changed by this experience of lockdown.**

**And so there is something vital to our renewal that we return to our engagement with symbols as signs of something permanent and unchanging: the desire to be together, the sharing of the Word of God and the recollection of the stories that lie deep within us as we draw strength from celebrating the sacraments in this place. However long ago, however unfamiliar it feels, this Mass - and the baptism that follows it at 10am - tap into something so much deeper, something both mysterious and compelling, something that enables us to say with the words of Psalm 107, *The Lord gathers them out of the lands, from east and west, from north and south; the Lord changes deserts into pools water and dry lands into water-springs. Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, and his mercy endures for ever.***

**One of the themes in my life as an amateur photographer has been a life-long interest in notices and signs. Some are funny or quirky, some are thought-provoking: all capture more than the words or pictures they contain. On the front of today’s pew sheet in the familiar sign to be found at chemists and pharmacies, the symbol of Hygieia the Greek goddess – not of healing (that was accorded to her father Ascelpius) - but with the prevention of sickness.**

**Hygieia is often depicted feeding a snake from her bowl. And the parallel with the story from our Old Testament story in Numbers, won’t be lost on you. When, 1300 years before Jesus, the people had been bitten to death by a plague of snakes for their rebellion against God, the antidote was again the figure of a snake or serpent which Moses was told to set up in the desert. Whoever looked at the serpent of bronze would live.**

**And both of these stories, Moses’ healing ‘serpent on a pole’ and Hygieia’s healing of a snake from 700BC, are brought together in these words of St John: *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* … yes, be restored, healed … *have eternal life.***

**In our tradition the agent of healing is, of course, Jesus who is lifted up, not on a pole, but on the Cross.**

**Whether we have managed to hold on to it or not in this pandemic, we are deeply into the season of Lent. And I was moved yesterday as I watched two visitors putting their hands on the small Stations of the Cross around the Church, the story of Jesus taking up his Cross – for the healing of the nations.**

**And that is where we are: in the middle of all the disruption when so many familiar parts of our life have been relegated to the margins, this great symbol of the Cross keeps us grounded.**

**For our healing: *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.***

**As we begin to put our lives back together, slowly, untidily, we are bound to ask what we have lost – but also what we have gained by the lock-down experience? Where have we floundered for want of the routines and the familiar; what have we been able to do (or think about) because we had more time?**

**As with fasting and all ‘going without’, what I pray is that we return to these great symbols – the Cross, the Eucharist, the waters of baptism, the sense of being the body of Christ – with a new appreciation and a new clarity – in this ‘new territory’ in which we find ourselves. For they are, and always have been, the source of our healing and our renewal.**

Faithful cross, above all other: one and only noble tree!
None in foliage, none in blossom, none in fruit thy peer may be:
sweetest wood and sweetest iron,
sweetest weight is hung on thee.