**John 3:14-16 Lent 3.15 The Central Tenets of our Faith.**

I suggested before we moved into the ministry of the Word this morning, that we be attentive to the theme revealed in the readings. What did you notice? (feedback)

The lectionary readings set for today are absolutely pivotal in our understanding of the Christian message. Our Lenten journey wouldn’t be authentic unless we took the time to examine the central tenets of our faith. And so we have the story of the serpent in the wilderness, where Israel’s healing is dependent on **faith**; we have the discourse in Ephesians 2 about being saved by God’s **grace**; and we have the story of Nicodemus where he is told that he must be **born again** to see the kingdom of God.

Why revisit the fundamentals of our faith? Because it is good discipline. It is a good discipline for two reasons: First, it keeps us personally on the straight and narrow. We are immersed in a culture that bombards us with consumerism, worldliness and compromise. It’s not uncommon for Christians to find themselves enticed by the world, drifting away from these central truths, and embracing a watered down Gospel that neither challenges nor blesses them.

The second reason revisiting the central tenets of our faith is that such reminders stay with us, and they are helpful when we are called upon to share our faith.

So…the reading from Numbers is all about **FAITH.** The story foreshadows our redemption in Christ. The Israelites sinned by complaining against Moses and the Lord and hankering after Egypt. The consequence of their sin was death – by venomous serpents. With the death of many of their number, the Israelites recognised their sin and pleaded for deliverance. At God’s command, Moses made a bronze snake, raised it on a pole, and the Israelites who looked in faith upon the snake were healed. Incidentally, this is where our medical profession gets its serpent symbol. But you knew that, didn’t you?

The parallel? All humankind has sinned. The consequence for all of us is eternal death. But God has provided a way of deliverance, through faith in Jesus. John spells it out for us in this morning’s Gospel reading. He says, **“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.”**

In the same way that the Israelites had to look upon the bronze serpent in faith in order for God would deliver them, so we too must look to Jesus in faith, believing that God will deliver **us**, through his death and resurrection.

**FAITH.** Without it, we cannot be saved.

Then we have Ephesians 2, verses 1-10. This passage is about **GRACE.**

Paul begins this section by laying some groundwork. **“You were all dead in your sins once!”** he declares. **“You followed your own cravings, desires & thoughts.”** - which is the situation in which all human beings find themselves. Paul continues by saying that while in that state, we were all objects of God’s wrath.

Now that’s sobering stuff, isn’t it? We haven’t got to the grace part yet. Before we recognise the enormity of God’s grace, Paul wants his readers – and us - to understand the seriousness of our sinful condition.

I think that is where we sometimes fall down in our communication of the Good News to other people. We’re much more comfortable sharing the message that God loves us and wants us to be his children. Of course that is true, but if we don’t share the seriousness of the human condition as well, people are not going to recognise their need for God.

Before grace can come into play, people need to repent, and they are unlikely to repent if they don’t see that they have anything to repent of. We need to be bold enough to mention the S-word when we share our faith with others! Sin. As Paul tells us in his letter to the Romans, “**All have sinned and fall short of God’s glory”**  (Rom 3:23) He follows with, **“The wages of sin is death.”** Of course the rest of this verse in Romans gives the up side, **“but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”** (Rom 6:23)

Back to our Ephesians reading - once Paul has laid the groundwork, reminding his readers of their sinful condition, he says jubilantly in verses 8-9, **“It is by GRACE you have been saved, through faith. And this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God; not by works, so no-one can boast.”**

Do you remember the story I told you last week of the lady I met who made up her own rules to live by? In case you weren’t here, I had a conversation with a lady some time ago who informed me that she felt confident she’d go to heaven. The reason? She’d set herself some rules to live by which she found easy to keep, and so she was able to convince herself that she was a good person. If she thought she was a good person, so would God, so she was fine.

But where was her trust? (feedback) It was in herself and her own ability to meet the standards she’d set for herself. She did not recognise her sinfulness, so felt no need of a Saviour.

When we recognise our sin and repent, God’s grace abounds.

**GRACE. Without it, we cannot be saved.**

Then we come to Nicodemus. This reading is about the need for God’s mysterious working within us, bringing about **SPIRITUAL REBIRTH.**

Who was Nicodemus? As with so many of the characters in the New Testament, all we get is a thumbnail sketch. But we do know that he was a ruler and member of the Pharisees – the three-piece suited group of religious leaders that Jesus so often criticised for being hypocrites.

But it seems Nicodemus was searching for truth.He had come to the conclusion that Jesus had some answers, and so he sought him out.

Nicodemus would have known from the Hebrew Scriptures that the Jews were waiting for God’s kingdom to be restored. It had been fragmented many centuries earlier by the Babylonians, and the Jews were still an occupied and oppressed nation. Nicodemus, with the other Jewish leaders of his day, were waiting for the Messiah – God’s ruler and King- to bring in God’s new Kingdom. However, they were waiting for an earthly kingdom to be established, and an earthly King appointed by God, to rule over them, because that was really all they could envisage.

For Nicodemus however, despite all his knowledge and experience, despite his privileged position in the Synagogue, it somehow wasn’t enough. He had a nagging suspicion that there was more to belonging to God’s people than he knew. So when he met Jesus, his opening words were “We know you’re a teacher sent from God – otherwise you wouldn’t be able to do all these miraculous things.”

But his unspoken question was **“How can I know I belong to God’s Kingdom?”** It was this unspoken question that Jesus answered and in the short conversation that followed, Jesus blew Nicodemus’s preconceived ideas out of the water!

The major misconception Jesus needed to correct was that a person could belong to God’s kingdom by virtue of their pedigree. Nicodemus and his fellows believed that as Jews, they were God’s chosen people, and so by default belonged to God’s kingdom.

I wonder whether there are people in today’s church that share Nicodemus’s mistaken belief. Some time ago, I had a conversation with someone sitting next to me on a plane. When she discovered I was a priest, we got talking about heaven, and how a person got there. I asked her a question which is often quite revealing – “If (God forbid) you happened to fall under a bus and you found yourself face to face with God – and he said to you, ‘why should I let you into heaven?’ - what would you say?”

This lady said, “Oh – well I’ve been a churchgoer all my life. I was baptised in the same church my parents grew up in! I went to Sunday school and youth group, got confirmed and all of that, and I get there at least once a month these days!” In other words, her faith was in her pedigree – the fact that she was born and raised in the church!

Jesus would have said the same thing to this lady that he said to Nicodemus! “I tell you the truth. **No one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again.”**

Nicodemus, of course, didn’t understand. He was confused. **“Born again?”** He took Jesus quite literally. **“How can a man be born when he is old?** **Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born,”**

Jesus patiently explained that the birth he was talking about was spiritual. He told Nicodemus that he had to be born of water and the Spirit. There are a few different interpretations about what Jesus might have meant by that, but most commentators seem to agree that Jesus was talking about the physical and the spiritual. Water represented physical birth (we know that a gush of water from the womb heralds a baby’s birth into the world), and the **Spirit represented spiritual birth.**

Jesus went on to explain that Nicodemus should not be surprised that the process of spiritual rebirth was something that must be generated by the Holy Spirit. Our physical being can only generate physical things. **Spiritual rebirth was a work of God, and not something we could really understand.**

To be reborn spiritually and to therefore receive eternal life, Nicodemus did not need knowledge or a pedigree. He needed FAITH, He needed GRACE and he needed SPIRITUAL REBIRTH.

So, three central tenets of our faith have been highlighted this morning. What were they? (feedback?) **FAITH, GRACE, and SPIRITUAL REBIRTH.**

As part of our Lenten reflections this week, let’s take those three concepts and in the quietness of God’s presence, ask some searching questions. Where am I placing my FAITH at this point in time? Is it in Christ alone for my salvation, or am I tempted to trust in my own efforts? How aware am I of God’s GRACE? Am I regularly bringing my sinfulness before God in repentance and thanking him for his forgiveness? And lastly, with SPIRITUAL REBIRTH - let us invite God to renew and refresh his presence in us by his Spirit, that we may shine brightly with his life.

(And should anyone like to explore further what spiritual rebirth means – please come and talk to me).

Let us pray