

A DIFFERENT KIND OF VACCINE

Genesis 12. 1-4a

Romans 4. 1-5, 13-17

John 3. 1-17

I speak to you in the name of ✝ the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

One of the greatest medical innovations in recent centuries is the development of the vaccine. If a doctor injects your body with a small amount of the disease you want to avoid (either an inert version of the disease, or a sufficiently weak amount to prevent you from getting the full-blown affliction), then your cells will produce antibodies that will ward off the disease should you later come into contact with it. It's an illustration of the principle that 'like cures like'.

Even as we meet this morning, research teams all over the world are working hard to elaborate an effective vaccine to prevent coronavirus disease. I hope that they succeed; but I am told that finding such a vaccine will take time. Just yesterday, *The Telegraph* reported that human trials on a vaccine against coronavirus are not due to start before April. And even if those trials are successful, more time will be needed before the vaccine can be produced and put on the market.

When our Lord spoke to Nicodemus in the third chapter of St John's gospel, the Jewish leader had no knowledge of coronavirus, of course (even though Nicodemus was a very learned man). He was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, the Council of Elders that was at the centre of Jewish political and religious life. But interestingly enough, in his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus introduces the concept of a (sort of) *vaccine*. Let me explain.

Christ refers to an incident in the history of the Jewish people that is recorded in the Old Testament, in the book of Numbers, chapter 21. The Israelites had just defeated the Canaanites; and as they set out towards the Red Sea, they began to mumble against God and against Moses, saying, ‘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’ (they were complaining about the manna and the quails¹ that God had been providing them). Then God sent poisonous serpents among the people, and as they bit them, many Israelites died. When the Israelites repented and came to Moses, God told Moses to make a poisonous serpent of bronze, and to put it on a pole; and whenever the poisonous serpents bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.² The Israelites had to look at an image of the *very thing* that was afflicting them, and somehow doing so helped. It was a kind of vaccine, if you like.

And then, continuing in his conversation with Nicodemus, our Lord goes right on to say that ‘just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.’ This time, the problem is not coronavirus; it is not the Israelites mumbling against God and against Moses in the desert; it is a more generalised problem. One could even call it a pandemic of global and eternal proportions. It is the recurring problem of human sin. We all have caught it; we all are suffering from it; and there is no mistaking the final outcome of this pandemic. It leads to spiritual death in every single case, in every single patient.

But there is a vaccine, says Jesus. Whoever looks at the Son of Man lifted up on the cross, whoever looks at his *death*, will have their problem with spiritual death solved. They will not perish, but have eternal life. Somehow, when we cast our eyes on Christ’s death, we receive the ‘gospel vaccine’, as it were. As curious as it may sound,

¹ Cf. Ex 16. 13-16.

² Cf. Num 21. 4-9.

if you and I are to be ‘born again’ (or ‘born from above’, as our translation has it) one of the main things we need to believe is that *our Lord’s death* helps us. We need to dispense with the idea that we can help ourselves, pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, ‘earn’ salvation, or in any way ‘get by’ on our own.

Nicodemus was challenged by Jesus to believe this, too. The Jewish leader had to dump the notion that his religious credentials assured him a special status before God. Nicodemus had to die to all that. His notions of what one has to do in order to gain favour with God had to be crucified with Christ.

The way into God’s kingdom leads through death. That may sound scary, particularly to those of us who as children memorised John 3. 16 as a single verse, without thinking of our Lord’s words that preceded it. But if we can follow Jesus to the cross and believe the scandalous idea that somehow his horrible death helps us, then *already in this life* we will be injected with the gospel vaccine, an inoculation that will keep us safe when our own death arrives one day.

Most people are so overly familiar with John 3. 16 that we think it’s a simple, straightforward text. But actually it’s not. It was properly disorientating (and then, hopefully, re-orientating) to Nicodemus, the first person who ever heard these words.

Oddly enough, our text does not tell us precisely how Nicodemus reacted when he heard John 3. 16. The Jewish leader drops out of the picture after the third chapter of John’s gospel.

He does, however, make two more very brief, cameo appearances. The first comes in John 7, when the Sanhedrin begins plotting against Christ. At that juncture, Nicodemus speaks up to ask that they all make certain to follow the letter of the Law

in investigating our Lord. And Nicodemus's final appearance is in John 19, when he is said to have helped Joseph of Arimathea embalm and then bury the dead body of Jesus.

We don't know, though, if either incident indicates he had become a disciple of Christ after all. Commentators and preachers across the centuries have been divided on this matter. Some say that Nicodemus's words in John 7 and his actions in John 19 indicate only that he remained Pharisee-like and fixated on the finer points of the Law: he buried the body of our Lord according to the Law's requirements, but he was not crucified with Jesus in the way he said was necessary. Others are more hopeful that the first person ever to hear John 3. 16 found life in those words.

Maybe it did happen that way for old Nicodemus. We should hope it did. And if so, maybe it went something like this:

Maybe, as Nicodemus listened to Christ in the flicker of the firelight on that night long ago, maybe he found his pulse quickening. Hearing the words of what we now call John 3. 16, maybe Nicodemus felt a spasm of joy, a thrilling jolt like what you get when the doctor says that you don't have lung disease after all, but just a touch of the flu.

If so, then perhaps some time later when he buried our Lord, maybe Nicodemus recalled that image of the snake on a pole. And if so, then maybe, three days later, when Nicodemus heard the report that this Jesus had risen from the dead, maybe that old senior citizen Nicodemus found himself inexplicably weeping; crying and carrying on like a new-born baby.

Amen.