



“Look up”
service for reflection for Sunday 14th March 2021
Mothering Sunday

Introduction

In both the Bible stories for this Sunday we will hear how life and health are found by “looking up”. The Old Testament passage tells how the people of Israel in the Wilderness could be healed of snake bites if they looked up at a metal snake. Then in our gospel reading we hear Jesus describe how he will be lifted up like that metal snake on the pole. So we think of looking up to the cross and the life that flows from it. Indeed, the whole of today’s gospel passage will tell us Jesus was truly someone to look up to. At this time of Mothering Sunday we will also think of those women in particular we look up to because they bring life in the way they nurture.

Prayer

Lord, we pause to prepare ourselves to receive from you. Always generous, you long to have us draw close. You feed us with your words and nurture us through the kindness we find in your people. In this service of reflection help us to know we are part of your family and you are our loving carer. Through Jesus our friend. Amen.

Hymn: Praise to the Lord the Almighty the King of creation! (*Singing the Faith 88*)

1 Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation!
O my soul, praise him, for he is thy health and salvation!
All ye who hear, brothers and sisters, draw near,
praise him in glad adoration.

2 Praise to the Lord, who doth prosper thy work and defend thee;
surely his goodness and mercy here daily attend thee:
ponder anew what the Almighty can do,
who with his love doth befriend thee.

3 Praise to the Lord, who doth nourish thy life and restore thee,
fitting thee well for the tasks that are ever before thee,
then to thy need he like a mother doth speed,

spreading the wings of grace o'er thee.

4 Praise to the Lord, who, when darkness of sin is abounding,
who, when the godless do triumph,
all virtue confounding,
sheddeth his light, chaseth the horrors of night,
saints with his mercy surrounding.

5 Praise to the Lord! O let all that is in me adore him!
All that hath life and breath, come now with praises before him!
Let the amen sound from his people again:
gladly for aye we adore him.

Joachim Neander (1650–1680)
translated by Catherine Winkworth (1827–1878) and Rupert E. Davies (1909–1994)

Bible Reading: Numbers 21: 4-9

We hear a story from the years when the People of Israel lived in the wilderness.

The Israelites left Mount Hor by the road that leads to the Gulf of Aqaba, in order to go around the territory of Edom. But on the way the people lost their patience ⁵ and spoke against God and Moses. They complained, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt to die in this desert, where there is no food or water? We can't stand any more of this miserable food!” ⁶ Then the LORD sent poisonous snakes among the people, and many Israelites were bitten and died. ⁷ The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Now pray to the LORD to take these snakes away.” So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸ Then the LORD told Moses to make a metal snake and put it on a pole, so that anyone who was bitten could look at it and be

healed. ⁹ So Moses made a bronze snake and put it on a pole. Anyone who had been bitten would look at the bronze snake and be healed.

Hymn: O the love of my Lord is the essence (*Singing the faith* 431)

This hymn is a poem speaking of the healing of our hearts that Jesus offers

1 O, the love of my Lord is the
essence
of all that I love here on earth.
All the beauty I see he has given to
me,
and his giving is gentle as silence.

2 Every day, every hour, every
moment
has been blessed by the strength of
his love.
At the turn of each tide he is there at
my side,
and his touch is as gentle as silence.

3 There've been times when I've
turned from his presence,
and I've walked other paths, other
ways;
but I've called on his name in the
dark of my shame,
and his mercy was gentle as silence.

Estelle White (b. 1925)

Bible Reading: John 3:14-21

¹⁴ As Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the desert, in the same way the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to be its judge, but to be its savior.

¹⁸ Those who believe in the Son are not judged; but those who do not believe have already been judged, because they have not believed in God's only Son. ¹⁹ This is how the judgment works: the light has come into the world, but people love the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds are evil. ²⁰ Those who do evil things hate the light and will not come to the light, because they do not want their evil deeds to be shown up. ²¹ But those who do what is true come to the light in order that the light may show that what they did was in obedience to God.

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Reflection: Look up

Who do you look up to in life? And how has that looking up helped you? In my home church we had to literally look up to the minister who stood in the raised pulpit making him, as they say "six foot above contradiction". I quite enjoyed his sermons and the way in which he had studied the Bible and reflected seriously upon it. We knew from how he dressed in his robes, and how long he took in his sermons, that the things of faith were important. I can't remember much I learned from him but am glad he showed me how matters of God and faith were significant and worthy of respect.

Perhaps my youth leader was more of an inspiring person for me to look up to. We were fortunate in my town that a new leader of our local YMCA campsite arrived when I was in my mid-teens. This man, called John, felt called, with his wife Maisie, to start a youth group for young people from all the churches in our town. They were a very inspiring couple. Their first child had been born with severe disabilities and we learned a lot from the way in which John and Maisie loved and cared for her and their second child also. It amazes me now that they both had responsible jobs, two young children and yet still spent their Sunday

evenings hosting 25 young people in their front room. By doing so they taught a lot of young people, and then in turn their families, about God's way of living.

The people who first read and heard the gospel of John may have been wondering if Jesus Christ was someone they could look up to. In the first century there was a lot of uncertainty around as to who Jesus was and whether what he taught about God was correct. Today's passage tells much about the nature of Jesus and the exceptional place he has to play in God's reaching out to people, not just then but ever since.

The people who first heard these words would most likely have known the story of the bronze snake in the wilderness very well. It was part of all they celebrated about their great leader Moses. The metal snake itself was for them a sign of God's healing mercy in their midst. Today's passage links back to it in verse 14: "And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up". So here as elsewhere in this gospel, and also in the other gospels, Jesus is noted to be like Moses but even better. For as verse 14 goes on "whoever believes in him may have eternal life".

These words are given in the context of a longer conversation Jesus is having with Nicodemus at night. Nicodemus was a leader in the Jewish courts. He had seen the many signs of the healing Jesus was doing and had come to Jesus to find out more. His coming to Jesus at night suggests he wasn't too sure about Jesus and didn't want to be clearly associated with him. He is curious though and Jesus responds to him.

I think it is really significant that Jesus engages with Nicodemus' curiosity. Nicodemus is a scholar and Jesus talks with him on an intellectual level. However, Jesus is critical of Nicodemus' failure to fully understand what he is doing and to join with him. In today's passage Nicodemus remains a person of the night, in the dark literally and metaphorically we might say. This is not the end though for Nicodemus as he turns up later in the story after Jesus has died. Then with Joseph of Arimathea he helps to take Jesus' body down from the cross and prepares it for burial. This would suggest to me that Nicodemus does come to look up to Jesus and does come to love him fully.

We come back to the question - Who do you look up to? If, like Nicodemus, we come to look up to Jesus it will mean we are people of the light. It will also mean we can find healing for our hearts and wholeness with his help.

On Mothering Sunday we might be thinking of those people who have ministered the healing of Jesus to us. It might be our mothers or it might be someone else. At the heart of our passage are some of the best known words of Scripture: "For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son". Love is at the heart of all Jesus says and does. Love will be what we celebrate when we remember our mothers or those who nurtured us. In turn then, who might we be called to nurture in love? Are we people of light others might look up to?

A prayer of intercession

Hear the prayers of your children.
God of abundant love, you are like a mother who never forgets:
we give you thanks for those who have mothered us during the difficult

times of life and who have rejoiced with us in moments of celebration.
God of abundant love: **hear the prayers of your children.**

God of abundant love, you long to be a mother who comforts:
we ask for your comfort for those who are sad or sick or lonely this day;
we pray especially for those who mourn and ask for your comfort upon them.

God of abundant love:
hear the prayers of your children.

God of abundant love, you are a mother to the motherless.
We pray for those who find Mothering Sunday a particularly difficult day:
for those whose own mothers have died;
for those whose relationship was or is difficult with their mother;
for those who mourn for the children they could never bring to birth and mother.

We ask you God to mother them.
Christ our Lord.

Amen

The Lord's prayer

Hymn: I heard the voice of Jesus say (*Singing the faith 248*)

1 I heard the voice of Jesus say:
'Come unto me and rest;
lay down, O weary one, lay down
your head upon my breast.'
I came to Jesus as I was,
weary and worn and sad,
I found in him a resting-place,
and he has made me glad.

2 I heard the voice of Jesus say:
'Behold, I freely give
the living water; thirsty one,
stoop down and drink and live.'
I came to Jesus, and I drank
of that life-giving stream;
my thirst was quenched, my soul
revived,
and now I live in him.

God of abundant love:
hear the prayers of your children.

God of abundant love, you are like a mother hen who gathers and protects her children under her wing.

Teach us what it means to find security in the shadow of your wings.
Show us how to reach out and call others to your love and protection:
for the weak and vulnerable in our communities, we ask your blessing and protection.

God of abundant love:
hear the prayers of your children.

God of love, mother to all, hear these prayers and answer them,
for the sake of your children.
We pray in the name of your Son,
Jesus

3 I heard the voice of Jesus say:
'I am this dark world's Light;
look unto me, your morn shall rise,
and all your day be bright.'
I looked to Jesus, and I found
in him my star, my sun;
and in that light of life I'll walk,
till travelling days are done.

Horatius N. Bonar (1808–1889)

Blessing

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Love of God, and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, now and for evermore. Amen.

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