**Onion Peel. 14 March, 2021.**

I am a great fan of Jeff Dunham, the ventriloquist, and on Friday this week, Sheila and I drove up to Merrit with our two dogs to meet someone we had never met and give her a lot of money. The reason for this is because I had commissioned her to make me a very complex puppet that would look as near as possible like my Great Dane, Jake, who passed in July of 2014. This was, for Melissa - this lady’s name - a huge undertaking, and something on a scale that she hadn’t tackled before, even though she is an accomplished and well-known puppet maker, having met and spent time with Jim Henson of the Muppets fame.

You needn’t worry that my large puppet Jake is going to try and compete with Vicar Dave’s Jackal and Giraffe, who helped him to explain difficult theological arguments when Dave got bogged down. I have spoken with Jake and he tells me that he’s not even sure that he can spell ‘theology’, so even if he turns up in church or on zoom at some point, he’ll probably just tell you about himself and his home in South Africa, where he was born.

Thinking of Jeff Dunham and other ventriloquists set me to thinking, however, of the uses and disguises we as puppeteers can employ, not only to get our funnies out there, but also our opinions, prejudices, thinly veiled insults and dodgy jokes. What a way to go! It wasn’t me, your honour, it was Jake, Giraffe, Jackal that said those things!.

Watching a different ventriloquist on a ‘Someone’s got talent’ show the other day on You Tube, the artist had two puppets and was making up to the judges panel, one of whom was a very attractive young lady called Gerry. Whilst the artist was interacting - apparently - with his one puppet, he had the other puppet - a large toucan bird - keep interjecting with, “I want Gerry” in a voice that left nothing to the imagination. It was funny, but I was left thinking how much license you can take if you pass the blame to someone, or something else. How easy it then becomes to criticize and insult, to cast aspersions and demean another person, instead of learning to accept them as they are.

Carl Gustav Yung wrote in his book, ‘Modern Man in Search of a Soul’, ‘We cannot change anything unless we accept it. Condemnation does not liberate, it oppresses…if we want to help a human being we must be able to accept them as they are. And we can do this in reality only when we have already seen and accepted ourselves as we are. In life it requires the greatest discipline to be simple, and the epitome of a whole outlook upon life.’

Our Exodus reading brings the Israelites up with a jolt. It forces them to look at themselves, to re-prioritise, to stop whining about the sort of food they have - where previously they had none, and to focus on God as the source of their strength and their future. Dwelling on trivialities is not important, God says. Jesus says the same thing; ‘And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin:…But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.’ (Matt. 6:28).

[I had to put in some of the old King James Version of the bible as the language is so amazing in places.]

And the final verse 34 of that chapter ends in the Vulgate; ‘sufficit diei malitia sua.’ Just so you can quote some Latin to your grandchildren. (‘Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.’)

So God brings the Israelites back into relationship with him by first getting their attention by a plague of venomous snakes, and then by giving them a means of avoiding their just retribution.

If you were paying attention you might have noticed that a parallel lesson is being recounted in our psalm 107. Look again at verses 17 to 19; ‘Some became fools through their rebellious ways and suffered affliction because of their iniquities. They loathed all food and drew near the gates of death. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,

    and he saved them from their distress.’ Here is a neat parallel to the Israelites complaining about their manna and quail and ‘suffering affliction because of their iniquities.’

But this business of making a snake on a stick is fascinating - not because you may think it was a masterful piece of art, but because of the words used and their implication that ties intimately into our New Testament gospel.

First off let us go back to the original text and the Hebrew words used. The NRSV translates the Hebrew as Moses being told to make a ‘poisonous serpent and put it on a pole…’

And immediately we are in trouble; not only is there no word for ‘poisonous’, but there is no word for ‘snake’ either.

If you bear with me you’ll see why I think it’s important when we get to the NT link with this passage.

The actual Hebrew word used is ‘Saraph’, and if we turn to Isaiah 6:2, we see this remarkable verse: ‘Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings; with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.’ And wouldn't you just know it, the heavenly Seraphim of this passage is precisely the same word and Hebrew spelling.....saraph.....as what it was that Moses hung up on the pole, that is usually translated as fiery serpent. Here's the thing, the Hebrew word for serpent or snake is nachash. And in neither Numbers 21:8, nor in Isaiah 6:2, is the word nachash used......only saraph. Which you would have to agree is odd, in that Seraphim are regarded as higher than angels in the heavenly realms, and certainly not objects of loathing and fear.

So did Moses make something that wasn’t a snake? Well, probably not, as we find in Kings 18:4, reporting on an event some 5 to 6 centuries later, that Hezekiah ‘removed the high places and broke down the sacred pillars and cut down the Asherah. He also broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the sons of Israel burned incense to it; and it was called Nehushtan.’ In other words they had turned it into an idol. Not a good thing, if we can remember our Ten Commandments from last week.

The Hebrew used here for bronze serpent was nechosheth nachash; nechosheth means bronze, and here we find our usual Hebrew word for serpent or snake, nachash. So here in 2 Kings is an independent account that indeed the object placed on the pole was in the shape of a snake, a serpent looking thing at the least.

But this entire incident is very bothersome for all kinds of reasons, not the least of which is that the serpent is the primary Biblical figure for representing Satan from the first chapters of Genesis all the way through to Revelation. So, is what we have here a God-ordained symbolized representation of Satan hung on a pole (that somehow heals snake bites) and is then in the New Testament compared to the Messiah's experience on the Cross, by none less than Jesus Himself?

Let's peel this onion back another layer by understanding what the problem was that caused Hezekiah to take down and destroy that long-cherished bronze serpent, a virtual icon of the Israelite's wilderness experience.

As I mentioned earlier, it had become an idol, had incense burned to it, and it had been given a name - Nehushtan.

Now Jesus, in our gospel, refers to himself being lifted up in the same way that the snake or seraph on a pole was lifted up by Moses in the desert; and that by so doing he would draw all men to him (John 12:32) and we would not perish but have eternal life.

[I shall cover the concept of eternal life in another sermon - but not now.]

So Jesus here is equating the fiery seraph on a pole held up by Moses in a similar vein to his own Cross, which has become a symbol of our worship and devotion. How many of you - at this moment - are wearing a cross or use one as a symbol of your faith and an object of your veneration?

And now we need to remember what we can learn about the depiction of Satan in our bibles.

To start with he is seen in Genesis as a snake. I agree, before any of you want to start an argument with me, that here he is a metaphorical snake. I don’t believe in the Garden of Eden or the story of Adam and Eve as something that has any historical truth. Allegory is used here to represent a deeper meaning.

But returning to our bible, we are told that Satan began as a very high order heavenly being. That he was among the most beautiful and the most powerful of heavenly beings. Isaiah 14:12 "How you have fallen from heaven, O star of the morning, son of the dawn! You have been cut down to the earth, You who have weakened the nations! "But you said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God, And I will sit on the mount of assembly In the recesses of the north. 'I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.' "Nevertheless you will be thrust down to Sheol, To the recesses of the pit.’

In order to understand how this mighty Seraph became a serpent we have to visualize him as a creature with legs who tempted Eve in the Garden, because God’s punishment was to reduce him; ‘And the LORD God said unto the serpent, Because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field; upon thy belly shalt thou go, and dust shalt thou eat all the days of thy life:

If we now go to the other end of our bibles and see what is said about Satan here, we have a version of the battle that defeated Satan. Revelation 12:7 says, ‘And there was war in heaven, Michael and his angels waging war with the dragon. And the dragon and his angels waged war, and they were not strong enough, and there was no longer a place found for them in heaven.’

I see a rather interesting connection between the winged Seraphim that stood erect in Heaven, the earthly Serpent in the Garden of Eden that had been cast out of Heaven (who used to be erect but was cursed to crawl on its belly), the Saraph that was put on the pole and held high up into the air, and the Dragon who is Satan, that is fiery, flies with wings, has the look of a serpent, and is identified in Revelation as Satan.

Could it be that the heavenly being that was cast out of Heaven was a Saraph (a Seraphim), and it was a rebellious saraph who became known on earth as Satan? It is quite interesting that Jesus said this about Satan:

Luke 10:18 And He said to them, "I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning.

Right, I have given you enough symbology for one sermon, and I don’t want you to think I’ll be vying with Dan Brown to write the next apocryphal text like the Da Vinci Code.

So, I need a take home message from all of this, even if you don’t.

What I take home from all of this is the significance that we place on our symbols of faith. Let us look at the snake on a pole; this has been represented - wrongly - by the American medical fraternity at least, as the staff of Hermes, which has two snakes entwined around it, sometimes surmounted by wings, and in fact represents commerce and trade. What **does** represent healing is the Rod of Asclepius, which has just one snake on it that is supposed to be non-venomous, a symbol of medicine and healing, and the logo of the BMA.

Many of us have a crucifix, either worn or in our homes, and what I’d like each of us to do when we go home is to take it to a mirror and tell your reflection just what it means to you. Is it just a piece of jewelry, is it just an heirloom, is it just a present from someone at your confirmation?

Take a moment to reflect on its significance to you, personally. When I was confirmed I got a wooden crucifix that I put up in my bedroom. It had a brass figure of Jesus nailed to it. Some years later I removed the figure as I reckoned that Jesus had risen, so he was no longer on the cross. Years later still, I nailed him back, to remind me that he suffered and died for me, and looking at an empty piece of wood didn’t really tell me the story of his Passion.

So if you were an OT Hebrew, you might have gone to great lengths to see Moses’ rod with the snake or seraph on it - and you might even have worshipped it.

DON’T, please, worship your crucifix, whether there’s a Christ figure on it or not. Jesus told us that God is Spirit, and to be worshipped in Spirit and in Truth.

Your crucifix is only an aide memoire to remind you of your Saviour, and bring you to your knees in prayer.