

Homily St Pius—St Anthony 4th Sunday Lent Year B

Do you remember a couple of years ago, the series of jokes that came out, using a turn of phrase that a person would use to gently warn somebody that what they were doing, would probably result in bad outcomes? My younger brother introduced me to the examples (likely it was said to people ‘horsing around’ or ‘roughhousing’), It went, “Yeah, this is all fun and games, guys, until someone goes to the hospital” Or “it is all fun and games here until the police get called” My version is what a supervisor used to tell us about doing things safely. He’d say, “Guys, be careful, but be especially careful when the man with a clipboard shows up.....” That’s the inspector or compliance tech, right? Look out for the clipboard!

I think of that when we hear this popular scripture passage today from John 3:16, ‘God so loved the world, he sent His son’ Okay, that part is solid in our minds, ‘God sent His son out of love to us’ But even more we need to hear that God sent Jesus with a purpose, and that was ***“not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him”*** That is the gospel idea-really Good News. Jesus (His purpose for us) He did not come to ‘be the inspector, the ‘gotcha man’, writing you up, ‘don’t do this, don’t do that’, as if he was going to boss us into heaven. No, Jesus came to show us the way; to teach us genuine love of God, how to really love each other selflessly. I hear this today about Jesus, to mean that he is not an inspector-enforcer, but rather hH is the one who is going to say, ‘that sounds good to you, but let me point out that the last person doing that, had that one moment of joy or inattention, but it cost them years of heartache” Jesus is the hopeful one, who doesn’t come to jump us about every little thing wrong, but he points out to us, instead, what will save us from unnecessary pain- what is truly our good and best for us.

Which brings us to this great line and image mentioned in today’s gospel. ‘Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so the Son of man will be lifted up so that those who believe in him may have eternal life’. I realize that this detail of Moses lifted up a serpent may be news to us and we may wonder what was that all about?

Well, back in Numbers 21, the Israelites were being terrorized (they thought) by invading serpents in their camp that were biting (causing burning pain & even death) to some of them. So, they run to Moses to ask help from God about them. Where did the serpents come from? The scripture tells us that God allowed them to slip into the camp to wake the Israelites up. They had been taking God’s help & direction for granted & were presumptuous, feeling entitled to all God’s provisions, even when he was catering to their every need. Amazingly, they were receiving everything they needed, ***and they still complained.*** So the serpents crept in as a way to warn, “Be careful-you have it really good, but don’t realize it-('this’) all you have, it could all be

lost". I understand the serpent on the pole as a type of symbol of the Israelites' grumpiness- their tendency to complain, or grumble, or murmur. Yes, reading Numbers, it seems like 'they just couldn't be satisfied' What I mean is that there is a recurrent pattern to the Israelites' behavior with God. (Maybe they stand in for all of us) but inevitably in the desert they have it so good and still find things to complain over...yes 'they (not the snakes) bite the hand that feeds them'. For example, the Israelites consistently fulfil a pattern with God, always demanding that 'they know better than God, until they don't'. Their history in the desert is one of continual 'satisfaction-complaint', 'satisfaction-complaint', and 'satisfaction-complaint'.

First, once set free out on the open range of the desert, they complain-like they want to go back to Egypt- 'at least there it was predictable'- they could count on the slave barracks for sleep or straw to eat, 'out here we don't know what is next'. Then they complain 'we need water' So God provides them water from a rock of all places. Then they complain wanting bread, so God let it rain bread from heaven overnight. Then they complain wanting meat to go with bread, so God sent swarms of quail in the late afternoon. They even complained that they didn't have a flashy god image to worship like the other tribes around the desert so they badgered Aaron into making golden calf, and that was a major fall. And they probably complained next that they had to think so hard to come up with more things to complain about. So, it happened that God let some serpents slip into the camp, to wake them up. It reminded them that the desert is dangerous so they better stay focused on His direction. He wanted them to face their own grumbling/whining. Maybe, just maybe, the source of their suffering was coming from within—they needed to realize 'we have it pretty good'. So God tells Moses to lift up on a pole the serpent so that people can just look at it and be healed. That what was a source of pain/suffering can become a source of life and healing. Have we ever done that? Focused on something that was a burden and difficulty and it turned out God could use it to become a source of new life? Maybe this is what happens when, --how does it go?--that a grain of irritating sand becomes a pure pearl in an oyster, or coal under pressure & heat becomes diamond, or 'when handed a lemon make pie', or that it takes broken eggs to make an omelet. God wished for the Israelites to face up to their complaining and to appreciate what they did have; He would see them through that desert to the promised land and He did (but they had to do their part holding on in faith). And Jesus uses the similar image of being lifted up as a use of suffering for regenerating life, renewing-refreshing- that his death could become our new life.... That his humble acceptance of our sin redeems the waywardness of our lives. And above all that He shows us that... suffering (the way of the cross) and willing sacrifice, honestly facing and admitting

that (life just may be hard) things aren't as I want them, so Jesus embraced that about us, and for us. By His own humanity voluntarily accepted, he shows that this imperfect world does have snakes in it. Yet, they can be overcome. That is what we do through our Lenten disciplines of fasting and almsgiving- that we willingly give up something or take on extra hardship for the greater good of another person and for greater glory of God. Jesus came not to condemn but to save. And to show us the way. Our lasting peace and joy is found by looking up to Him and following Him.