

May I speak in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Before I get going on this sermon, there are two details, which I just like to mention by way of a preamble. The first is that today is the fourth Sunday of Lent, the mid-point in Lent, Rose Sunday. More importantly, it's Mothering Sunday, or Mother's Day in England, so I want to wish my mother, who I know is listening, a very Happy Mother's day today.

The second detail is that in the first part of this week, as I was starting to write the sermon, I was working on trying to link the Old Testament reading from the Book of Numbers with the Gospel reading from Saint John. They're clearly linked, they're deliberately paired today, they both make reference to lifting up. In Numbers, it's the lifting up of the serpent. In the Gospel, it's the lifting up of Jesus on the cross. But midway through the week, I realized that actually the real partnership in the readings is between the Epistle from the Book of Ephesians and the Gospel. And as I looked at them together, I found there were three very deep rich themes that bound those two readings together.

So what I want to do today, is to look at, primarily, the Epistle and the Gospel, and to examine three things which come across strongly in both of them. And in fact, what we have in those readings are the two greatest theologians of the New Testament: Saint Paul and Saint John, both wrestling with the fundamental issues of the Christian faith. So I want to look at them both and explore the three common themes, which I find in both of those readings.

The first is this, that both readings are concerned with matters of death and life. I put it that way around, not the customary life and death that we hear, because the New testament pattern is the move from death to life. That's the Easter model. Good Friday to Easter Sunday. That move from death to life. In John, Jesus talks about being lifted up to die on the cross, so that those who believe in him might have life. And look how Saint Paul starts, he tells his readers, "You were dead." That's typical

Paul. Not you were ailing, or you were under the weather, no, you were dead! You were dead in your transgressions and sin. What does that mean, because they obviously weren't physically dead, so what's he talking about here?

Somebody once pointed out to me a helpful picture. They painted a picture of a living room. And there was a plant in the corner of this living room, which was alive but unaware of the ball rolling past being chased by a cat. And the cat was unaware of the person on the sofa listening to beautiful music. The plant, the cat, and the person, were all alive but not in the same way. The plant, though living, was not sharing in the same experience as the person. And I do meet people sometimes who are obviously alive, but nevertheless say they feel dead inside. You may yourself know something about what that feels like. It seems to me that when people say such a thing, it means they feel lonely, or isolated, even estranged. When we're not connected, we often describe it by saying that something in me has died. And I think that's part of what Saint Paul is saying in this reading, that if we're not connected with God, then we're not fully alive.

Paul uses a word here to describe transgressions and sin, it's *paráptōma*, a Greek word. It's a word which literally means a slip or a fall. It's used when someone loses their way or drifts down the wrong road. The death Paul is talking about here, comes as we drift away from God. When we're separated from him, something within us dies.

One of my most vivid childhood memories, seared in my mind, occurred when I was 11, it was September, I was just starting at a new school, a secondary school as we call it in England. I was extremely well prepared, I had a very smart new uniform, I had all my books, a new bag to put it in. And my mother even went to the lengths of showing me how to get to school. I was going on a bus. She went with me on the bus. I got off at the bus stop and walked to the school gate, which was obviously closed, and then my dad came and picked us up, and we went home. I could not be more prepared. The school day itself went very well. I just had a problem getting home, 'cause I

went back to the bus stop, unfortunately the same bus stop as the one I had used the day before to get off to go to school, the bus came, I looked at the number on the bus, it was the right number. So I got on, the same stop, the same number, what could go wrong?

Well, you won't be surprised to know the bus was going the wrong way, no one had told me that I had to cross the road to get that number bus to go home. And without that piece of information, I was condemned to be always going the wrong way. I was heading away from home. And that's the image of transgression that Saint Paul is talking about here. He's saying, "You're heading the wrong way. Without Jesus, you're not even on the bus of life. You were dead," says Saint Paul.

However, that's not the end, thankfully, of what he had to say. He goes on to say, and there's a very important but, as there often is with Saint Paul. There's a but half way through the paragraph that we read, "But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through trespasses, made us alive together with Christ."

What made the difference? Where does our salvation begin? In God's great love for us. And how does the most famous verse in the Bible begin, that we heard from John? John 3:16, "God so loved the world." Love, love, love. God's first inclination towards us is to love. John 3:16 doesn't begin, "God got so fed up with the sin of the world." No. God so loved the world. And note how Paul goes on to say how God acted in Christ that he might show, and I quote, "The immeasurable riches of his grace and kindness towards us in Christ Jesus." God is not only loving towards us. He is kind.

Imagine we did a survey this week in La Jolla, we go out into the village and we take our clipboards and we ask everyone, church goers and non church goers, "How would you describe God?" I reckon we'd get a range of words. I reckon very very few people would use the word kind. But that's what Saint Paul says here. We've got a job to do, we've got to go out and tell our friends and neighbors that when we gather to church in worship, we

worship a God who loves us and is kind, because somehow that message hasn't got out. We need to spread the word of our loving and kind God.

You may have noticed in this season of Lent that we're having two collects. We begin with the Collect for Ash Wednesday. And I have asked for that that we have it every Sunday in Lent, because I think ... Well, particularly, I like the way it begins. It begins by saying, "Almighty God, you hate nothing that you have made." And in this Lenten season, especially with all the talk of sin and penitence that surround, we can lose sight of the fact that God's first inclination towards us is to love. Not anger, not hate, not disappointment, but love.

And the third shared theme between these two readings, is that they both recognized that God's love towards us is a giving kind of love. In John, we read, "God so loved the world that He gave, He gave His only Son." Saint Paul says, "By grace you have been saved. It is the gift of God." We are put right with God, we are saved, we are brought back to spiritual life, not by our own endeavors, or works, but by what God has done for us in Christ Jesus. The theological word for this is grace. God's unmerited favor.

Other people describe it like this, "There's nothing we can do to make God love us more, nothing we can do to make him love us less. He meets us in grace." It's not about what we do, it's all about what God has done for us. And our final hymn as we go out of church today, is going to remind us of that: "To God be the glory, great things he has done."

And this is where the lifting up of the serpent in the Old Testament comes in with the New Testament reading. In the Old Testament reading, we see how God provided the snake, all the people had to do to be healed, was to look at the bronze serpent. So in the New Testament; life comes to those who simply look and believe in Jesus, the one who was lifted up on the cross. They don't have to do anything to earn that salvation, that gift of life, they simply have to look to what Jesus has done for us on the cross.

Of course, we all rather wish that faith came as a reward. It would be ever so nice to know that all of us were gathered here at Saint James this morning, because we've done something particularly worthy to be called out from the crowd, to be recognized as holy. But that's not how it is. We're all here, we could all experience new life because we receive it as a gift from God.

I used to be at a church in a part of London called Highbury, and on the way to the church, there were lots of things that I now realize that you don't have in California, chestnut trees. And they used to be beautiful chestnuts on the tree. And as I went to church this day, I noticed there were loads of children throwing sticks up into the trees to try and dislodge the chestnuts. But I also noticed that on the ground there were dozens, hundreds of beautiful big juicy chestnuts. But the kids weren't interested in them. They'd much rather try and win and earn some for themselves by knocking them out from the tree, in the belief that anything they got down from the tree must be better than what's lying on the ground. They were wrong. If they wanted to gather all the chestnuts that they wanted or needed, they simply had to pick them up, but they'd rather hit them out of the tree.

So it is with God. The gift he gives to us is right there in front of us. We don't need to go off doing exotic or esoteric things, it's there, plain for us to see. We simply receive that gift of God's salvation.

And I'll close by drawing your attention to a word that sums much of this up. You might not be ... Well, it's not immediately obvious what the word is, it's buried away in that epistle. It's the word seated. Paul says, "God has raised us up with him and seated us."

There's a wonderful book on Ephesians by someone called Watchman Nee, and it's a three-word title, it's called Sit, Walk, Stand. It does sound like a book for instructing your dog, but it's not. It brings life to this book of Ephesians. And in it, Watchman Nee explains how Paul's theology can be understood in those three words. The Christian life has an element of walking in God's ways, Paul often talks about standing up to our enemy, but he

begins by talking about sitting. Being seated is an act of repose. Watchman Nee says, "We're saved by reposing in Jesus, resting in him, receiving the gift. We don't strain to earn his favor, as there's nothing we can do to save ourselves, we begin our Christian life by laying on Jesus the burden of our sin-sick souls, and depending completely on what he has done."

God's first call to us in Jesus isn't stop that, or don't do that anymore. It's come. Come, rest, and be seated, receive the gift I have to offer you. Jesus begins the Parable of the Great Banquet with these words, which sum up what I've been trying to say this morning. Jesus says, "Come, for all things are now ready." May God by His grace allow us to accept His invitation, to receive the gift of life, which He so lovingly longs to give us. Amen.