

**“Look up and live” a sermon based on John 3:14-21 and Numbers 21:4-9
preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 14 March 2021 by
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This year, more than others, people have been sleeping in the Knox garden beside the Church. One day there appeared to have been four people, last week there were two. The people sleep on the garden seats or sometimes underneath them or they find a flat area among the plants or under one of the trees. They cover themselves with blankets and old clothes, with cardboard and on one day polystyrene. Last week, they slept there through the heavy rain that fell through the night. They leave discarded cartons of wine or beer or stronger drink and cardboard and old clothes and old blankets. As well, people have been coming to the garden just to drink, up to six people. Often there is just one. And more recently, it appears from their behaviour, that there are people who might have taken drugs. At Holy Name there are often about three people sleeping and at First Church there is often one. There are people who bring their food baskets from St Vincent de Paul, take what food they want and discard most of the food in the agapanthus.

Nearly every day we are faced with a very sad sight, a very challenging sight. Most of the people move when you ask them, but they come back the following day. So we have enlisted the help of the Police and of Campus Watch. And last Sunday morning, we were able to offer a sausage to one man who had slept there during the night.

What a contrast it is in our garden. It is a very pleasant space with grand trees, colourful plants, a heritage building, bird song and plenty of room. It's an oasis on a busy main street. Families bring over the ice creams they bought from Rob Roy. People come from the hospital or the dentistry school or nearby businesses to have their lunch or sit quietly. On warm days, dozens of people sit on the grass in groups.

And here we are, followers of Jesus, the Jesus who spent time with people on the margins, the Jesus who cast out demons and sent them fleeing enabling people to live healthy lives, the Jesus who upheld people society ostracised, the Jesus who engaged the most unlikely people in conversation. Here we are as a church, trying to hold these two things together and trying to make sense of what is happening. And to make sense of it, I want to move to the strange image Jesus uses of the serpent in the

wilderness and his talking about the Cross. I want us to imagine that as we talk about the Garden, we are faced with the Cross, planted where we cannot avoid it.

“And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”

When people hear the phrase “eternal life”, many imagine it is about life after death or living forever. Eternal life is not about length but about depth, about a quality of life, what one preacher calls life-plus. Belief in Jesus offers deep living.

Let me though address the imagery of the serpent. The reference to Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness is a reference to what is said in Numbers 21. The people of Israel complained and grumbled, as they did from time to time, and it seems that there was a building to a crescendo, for on this occasion they grumbled against God as well as Moses. They had reached the peak of complaining. They were going for number one. So, says the writer of Numbers, God sent poisonous serpents among the people of Israel and they bit the people and some died. And the people came to Moses and admitted that they had sinned by speaking against God and against Moses. They prayed that God would take the serpents away. So Moses prayed for the people. And God said “Make a poisonous serpent and put it on a pole and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.” And that is what happened. The serpent on the pole.

When they looked at that pole, what did they see. Well, it was something of a mirror of their own society and living. Serpents biting at heels. Nipping at bodies. Wounding and hurting, with abundant ingratitude.

When they looked at the serpent on the pole they saw an image of their own living. When Jesus compares the lifting up of the Son of Man to the lifting up of the serpent, he is evoking a similar dynamic. On the one hand, it represents God’s absolute, total, ultimate commitment to people in love, right to the end, through all that would persuade God to give up on us, God remains faithful. The story of the serpent is of a God who is determined to save serpent people, to heal serpent people. Love to the end. And, it is also a mirror, of the inhumanity in which we are caught up, the wounding and crippling and crucifying of which we are a part, the serpent’s power. When we look into the eyes of the crucified Christ, we see the deepest compassion and care a human can offer. And we see in that compassion, a judgement on what put him there, the systems we build, the untruths we live. It is a moment of the

purest of love and the most telling of judgements. And in that mix is the possibility of new life, eternal life. The lifting up of Jesus on a cross, is God entering into the depths of our struggles and powerlessness and self-defeating patterns all in our world that is serpent-like. God enters into our depths, into the depths of us all, including people who sleep in our garden.

What does it mean that Christ is lifted up on a pole, on a Cross, in the Knox Garden? What is happening in our garden is holding up a mirror of what is happening in our society. We cannot ignore it or look away from it or imagine that we can banish it. The serpent powers are real and they keep re-emerging. Sure, we can issue a trespass notice so people don't come, and for the sake of safety we might need to do that, but we cannot relocate the Cross so that we can avoid facing what the Cross calls us to. We will have life when we face up to it, to see there the society that we ourselves have built, that we ourselves maintain, that we are part of. Public Health physicians know that they are almost powerless when they take on the liquor industry and try to reduce advertising and outlets. Like what used to happen with tobacco companies. We know our own powerlessness to deal with the serpent powers that slither through society.

And yet, through the doors to the Hall, there are people who by the grace of God have found a community of people who have emerged from addiction. Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. People who recognise who they are and who they can be. They are us. We are them. Christ is on a Cross in our garden, and in the city, and wherever we are. Helping us see who we are, mirrored back to us as he looks down on us with eyes of compassion. Helping us see who we are in Christ, recipients of eternal life.

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