

*And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up*

Last Sunday, hearing Jesus' speak of his body as the Temple, I mentioned the many punning double meanings in Jesus' words as reported by John, words taken literally by the listeners (sometimes with comic effect) but understood by those in the know. This is crucial again today as we hear Jesus speaking of being 'lifted up'.

This playful element in Jesus' teaching seems rarely to be noticed; older translations like the Authorised Version actively conceal it from us as they flatten out all scripture into one solemn literary style, which is not true to the diverse texts they translate. These aren't jokes in the stand-up sense; once noticed they won't send us into paroxysms of mirth. But the word plays intentionally introduce comic misunderstanding into the gospel narrative.

Irony and teasing double meanings are characteristic teaching styles in the ancient world. We understand irony, roughly, as saying or doing the opposite of what is meant, for effect. It is a big umbrella term functioning comedically and dramatically, verbally and situationally, but we easily enough understand it in teaching like this and double meanings abound in Jesus' teaching as reported by John.

The word *irony* comes from the Greek stock comic character *Eiron*, a clever underdog who by his wit repeatedly triumphs over the boastful character *Alazon*. This is similar to Jewish self-characterisation in the Old Testament in figures like Jacob, Joseph and David who best their opponents by their wits. The best-known teacher in the ancient world known as an *Eiron* was Socrates. The so-called Socratic irony of Plato's dialogues derives from this comic original: feigning ignorance and humility, Socrates goes about asking silly and obvious questions of all sorts of people on all sorts of subjects, only to expose their ignorance as more profound than his own. We're in similar territory with Jesus, a teacher who repeatedly conceals the truth in riddling puns, often answers a question with another question or an apparently oblique story, or even refuses, powerfully, to answer. He also dramatically 'confounds the wisdom of the wise'. He is apparently defeated by the powerful forces around him and executed as a criminal, but this turns out to be an ironic coronation. He then triumphs in the resurrection, demonstrating that the true Kingdom, the power of eternal significance, lies with God, the true giver of life.

The title on the Cross, 'The King of the Jews', is typical gospel irony, both mocking and true. But in John irony is the foundation of whole scenes, such as the healing of the man born blind where a comic dialogue develops, by the end of which the blind man sees and those called 'the Jews' are blind. Or think of Jesus' encounter with the High Priest, who says that it is better that Jesus should die for the people: John says that because he speaks *as* High Priest he unknowingly speaks the deeper truth.

Today's gospel pun, 'lifting up' speaks directly to that Holy Week theme. Jesus refers to the bronze serpent in Numbers which, when they looked upon it, healed those

afflicted by snake bite: we heard it as our first reading and it is also graphically depicted in the central panel of our west wall, complete with cute flying snakes. In addition to the scriptural reference there are at least two more levels of meaning embedded in what Jesus says. If listeners just heard the phrase 'lifted up' they would at first assume he means 'exalted', treated with respect. With the reference to Numbers, but without having witnessed the crucifixion, they might still assume that he is to be in some glorious way an ensign of healing to the nation, just as those who looked upon the serpent on the pole were healed of their fatal snake-bites. But once the cross is added there is an additional sense of 'lifting up' which we mimic with our processional crucifix: Jesus *lifted up on the cross* becomes the sign of our healing. Then there is his actual exaltation, his resurrection and ascension into glory, which adds to the paradoxical irony already present in the words 'lifted up': this becomes Paul's teaching about the 'folly of the cross' and our necessary faith in Christ as truly crucified and truly risen. But the comparison with Moses' bronze serpent on the pole makes a primary reference to the healing, life-giving power of looking on the crucifixion, truly *seeing* it, recognizing it with understanding and faith: another of John's showings or epiphanies. The double 'lifting up', crucifixion and exaltation, are collapsed into one event in John's telling.

The gospel we heard today is part of what Jesus says to Nicodemus after the equally punning reference in that conversation to being born again / born from above. In baptism, we are born again into a new family, given to us by God, i.e. from above. Jesus reference to his being 'lifted up' (implying another above/below opposition) is followed by a further favourite opposition in Jesus' teaching as related by John: between light and darkness, present from his first chapter in yet another pun:

The light shines in the darkness but the darkness does not overcome it / understand it, a pun we can still just about capture in the old translation, 'comprehended it not'.

At the wedding at Cana the disciples believe in Jesus and see his glory. In the Temple, last week, the group John calls 'the Jews' refuse belief and are condemned. Enter Nicodemus, in secret and in fear. He is sitting on the fence, afraid of the Pharisees, but we learn later that by the time of the burial he has decided for Jesus. After Nicodemus comes the Samaritan woman, cheeky and unbelieving at first, then won over by Jesus' playful persistence (the pun on 'living water', which also means 'fresh, running water' in Greek). And so on: 'the Jews' on one side, the man blind from birth on the other.

For John the gospel is seeing, believing and acting. As we look on Jesus, lifted up, we are invited into the light of love to be set free by the truth. Our response to that invitation into that honest and loving light, determines the quality of our lives, blindly material or gloriously eternal.