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## Introduction

In our reflections during Lent we have been following – through the stories of Mark and John – a thread about things being hidden and revealed, and exploring some different aspects and dynamics of the journey from unknowing to understanding: the need to test and temper the ideas which come from moments of revelation; the way in which preconceptions and emotional, political, and religious commitments can impede the evolution of understanding; the importance of remembrance and reflection in coming to a fuller picture of things. Last week we saw Jesus using disconcertingly violent methods to draw attention to his true identity. This week we find him using a strange analogy in the same cause, and once again we will look to see what this can add to our understanding of how we come to see what is hidden, and then consider how we might apply this to thinking about how we deal with conflict.

### Preparation

Read Numbers 21: 1–9 and then write a brief synopsis of the key elements of the story. Why do you think it was included by the writers of Numbers?

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## Text

### John 3:14–21

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.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”

“And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their

## Comment

Today's passage starts somewhat abruptly with a very enigmatic statement and it is helpful to give this some anchorage by pulling back the focus a little so we can see the bigger story within which it is embedded. Jesus is in the middle of a conversation with Nicodemus – a Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin, and a wealthy man (he will later bring aloes and myrrh to anoint the dead body of Jesus in Jn 19: 39). Moreover he is a man impressed by what Jesus is doing, despite his cautious approach under cover of dark. In the ensuing conversation Jesus tells him that the signs themselves don't matter – what is important is that those who understand their significance need to respond with a radical change of life. John has clearly indicated that Nicodemus is a knowledgeable, a learned man, and Jesus talks to him at this level – but (unlike the disciple in our previous readings) he seems to be almost wilfully obtuse.

It is not entirely clear whether v14 marks a change from Jesus' voice to that of John, or whether what we hear in today's passage is in effect Jesus offering a Christological reflection on himself – but that does not itself necessarily matter here. What we have is another attempt – either directly by Jesus to Nicodemus or by John to his readers – to reveal the true identity of Jesus and the implications of this to those who, for whatever reason, simply cannot, or will not see what is in front of them. Nicodemus has refused or been unable to understand Jesus' talk of new birth – even though as a man steeped in the Hebrew scriptures he would have been familiar with similar ideas from the writings of Ezekiel (e.g. 11:19: 18:31; 36:26) so Jesus/John offers him, and us, another lens – the story of the bronze serpent.

At first sight though, this seems even more inaccessible: the tale is an ancient one from the time of the Exodus – Israelite grumbling after the escape from Egypt provokes God to send fiery poisonous snakes into the company. Following their repentance and pleas for mercy, he instructs Moses to construct a serpent effigy (itself a bizarre thing given the prohibition on making images) which, when held aloft, heals those who have been bitten by the snakes. How will this strange story help the true identity of Jesus be revealed? The clue comes in the way John uses the verb *hypsō* – to lift up – to lay out a theological paradox: He uses the term to describe the lifting of Jesus on the Cross (Jn 8:28; 12:32) but the verb also means 'to exalt' and it will later be used by Peter in Acts 2:33 and 5:31 to speak of Jesus' exaltation into glory after his resurrection. The cross is – in human terms at least – a moment of complete defeat and disaster; but in John's Gospel it is an absolutely essential part of revealing the true identity of Jesus and the nature of his Messiahship and it will be followed by the vindication of this through his resurrection and ascension. In effect John collapses all of this meaning into a single image – we see *through* Christ lifted up on the cross *to* Christ lifted up to glory through resurrection and ascension, and in seeing this we come to see the true identity of Christ with all that this implies. There is precisely the same counter-intuitive element here as in the story of Moses and the bronze serpent: one can only see and gain healing and life by looking on/participating in that which has brought despair and death. Understanding comes through looking at what appears to be the diametric opposite of the truth that has hitherto been hidden.

Can this add anything to the insights we have already gleaned when it comes to considering our understandings of, and responses to, conflict? Well perhaps it might be that sometimes, when understanding of a situation or of its motives, dynamics, or consequences remains elusive – either because people simply cannot or will not see what is 'under their noses' – then we need to think of other ways in which we can encourage them (and indeed ourselves!) to take another look. This might involve adopting a more imaginative approach – even one which may seem counterintuitive: perhaps we need to reach back into the history of the conflict or of the people involved to find an image or story which allows connections to be made from a different starting point rather than simply revisiting the same ground over and over again in an effort to force understanding; or perhaps we can approach understanding by a route other than words? John/Jesus uses the story of the bronze serpent as a springboard from which to then enter into a longer exposition of the nature and purpose of the Incarnation. We do not know what effect this might have had on Nicodemus (if we assume he was still present) – but we do know that somehow this conversation with Jesus was the start of a journey towards

understanding and that he will eventually re-appear, not under cover of darkness, but openly joining himself to Jesus – the kind of transformation which Jesus had urged on him in this encounter.

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## Response

Take some time to reflect on a situation of conflict (great or small) in which you are trying to help people work towards resolutions. In particular think about the different ways in which you are trying to foster understanding. Are there different, perhaps more imaginative, ways in which you might approach this? Are there shared stories or experiences on which you might draw? Even if these don't seem to immediately address the issues at hand, is there a way of making them into a lens which might take people to a different starting place from which to seek understandings?

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## Prayer

Jesus  
you often used unexpected actions and images  
to help those around you  
to a greater understanding  
of the patterns and purposes  
of God's Kingdom.

Give us that same imagination  
to see how a different word or action  
might break a deadlock  
or expand a connection,  
the wisdom to know when  
to take that different path,  
and the courage to do so  
when it is needed.

Amen