

We've been using the passages from the Hebrew Bible for our zoom Lectio meetings in Lent this year and it's been a useful exercise, not least because many of us are less familiar with the older biblical stories and the pattern of early Israelite history, at least after the Pentateuch – the first five books. The story of Cyrus, for example, is a novelty for some and only makes sense here when one realises that his importance is as symbol of God's grace at work; that is, of God's entirely unconditional love for the people of God, restoring Temple worship to them through the entirely unexpected agency of a pagan king. They, or many of them, the most skilled, are in exile in Babylon and the Temple's goods, too, the instruments of worship, and Cyrus sends them back. Isaiah will even describe Cyrus as, not only a shepherd, but God's anointed one, God's Messiah (or Christ, in Greek) (Is. 45:1). This is the creator God, fully in charge of God's creation, choosing to redeem Israel because of his love. And this theme or dynamic is then picked up by Paul and the writer of John's gospel:

God loved us with so much love that he was generous with his mercy (Eph. 2:4)

and

God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son (Jn.3:16)

When Jesus says these words to the rabbi, Nicodemus, in the context of Moses lifting up the serpent in the desert, he too is engaging in an exercise of lectio: exploring biblical texts for their meaning today. Nicodemus hasn't quite caught up with just how far Jesus has gone with his exegesis, or is it eisegesis? – a development of the text, but the words are those on the page for *our* later understanding or catching up, too. The whole argument of the nature of faith is here: of what does it consist? where does it come from? how does it work? And any answers we have fall away in the light of God's action. It's a grace: not something we do for God, but something God does for us or, better still, not a 'thing' at all, a possession to be traded for this or that, but a relationship, a state of being which cuts across all boundaries, whether religious or political or even sinful. God saves us, despite our sin, and can do so in any which way God chooses. And so we find faith operating wherever people may be found – or shall we just call it love and the trust that necessarily goes with that. 'Trust me,' God says. 'I know what I'm doing.'

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