



Bristol Cathedral

**A Sermon preached at Choral Evensong, 16th December 2014,
By The Dean**

(Numbers 21:4-9)

I have just started a book with a slightly uncomfortable title, it is called: *Landscapes of the Metropolis of Death*, by a man called Otto Kulka. Kulka is now in his eighties, for years he has been one of the leading experts on the Nazi concentration camps. He specialized in the close study of German documents, in clear, rather detached analysis. He has written other books, giving the details, making important judgements. He is precise.

Because Kulka is such an expert on the camps some of the survivors have talked to him over the years, told him stories, told him what he should go and see. He listened and he took note, and for years and years he never told anyone that he had been in the camps himself. Kulka is a child of Auschwitz, sent there as a ten year old in 1943, remaining imprisoned there until January 1945. The book I am reading, written in his old age, is the first he has written out of his own experience. It is the sort of book that you can only read; you can't give a second hand account of what he saw and thought; it's too easy. Too cheap. There is though one moment in the book that struck me as extraordinary. In the midst of all the other things he remembers: the horror, the brutality, there is a very different memory

A brief moment of pause, when he gazed upward one day in 1944 and caught the blue of a summer sky, "imprinted on my memory as the colour of summer, the colour of tranquillity, the colour of forgetting."

When I read that first it just seemed bizarre. How could you forget where you were, how could a glimpse of the sky help in a place like that at a time like that? What is it about looking at something that can make such an impression?

We will come back to Kulka, because what I have to say this evening is something about the importance of looking. The first reading we heard was from Numbers. The people of Israel are in the wilderness with Moses and all the confidence and hope of the escape from Egypt has drained out of them. They are wandering aimlessly, they have lost their way, Miriam has just died having apparently got nowhere and the conversation has turned nasty. At Massah the place of *testing*, and Meribah the place of *quarrelling*, Moses had faced a rebellion; the people have doubted their God and his power to save. Now, having moved on a little further, the people once again grumble about thirst and miserable rations.

The people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?"

God promptly loses patience and (as we heard) a rather unpleasant scene follows.

The LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died.

Poisonous serpents are hard to ignore and the people duly take the hint

The people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people.

Then, in a moment, that has been made famous in paintings and in stories and sermons Moses made a serpent of bronze and put it on a pole.

And whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

I said it is a famous story, and it is, there is a painting of this scene in the Sistine Chapel. Jesus repeats the story in John's gospel:

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. John 3:14-15

It is one of the great stories of deliverance; it is an image of salvation. Look, just look, at this bronze serpent and you will live. As Jesus repeats this story it becomes a summons to look to the cross and know that we are safe. That is why there are so many pictures of Moses and the brazen serpent; that is why there is a great serpent sculpture on Mount Nebo, because artists love the idea that just looking has suddenly become so important. And yet it really is a very odd story and a very curious solution. As stories of salvation go, isn't this actually a bit of swizz and a swindle? If the Dean started keeping ferrets in the Lady Chapel and the ferrets bit the vergers, the vergers would not ask the Dean for a ferret on a stick so that they could look at that and feel better. They would ask the Dean to get rid of the ferrets. Why is it that the people are told to look at something? Or, put another way, why does Otto Kulka remember so vividly that moment of looking at the sky over Auschwitz?

...Imprinted on my memory as the colour of summer, the colour of tranquillity, the colour of forgetting.

I think the answer to that has something to do with the business of preoccupation. In the middle of the Occupy crisis I found it really difficult to say my prayers because every time I sat still and tried to clear my mind all my problems came rearing up in front of me. For a while I wasn't able to see beyond, or round, or over all the worries and decisions about what was happening on our doorstep. I could not see anything else. You could say that my problem was Occupy and the solution was for Occupy to go away, but that is not quite right. My problem was my inability to see anything other than what was right in front of me. I was the problem, not Occupy, and I needed the ability to see more, see differently.

I am slowly beginning to understand that one of the important truths in Christianity is that it directs my gaze away from myself. We all forget that, I think. We keep turning Christianity into the business of worrying about our motives and our actions, or thinking about how we might be better. In Lent we become self-conscious all over again when we give up things and make an effort. The point about Christianity though is that I am not the story and it is not my life that is the model for anything. It is the long story of creation and redemption that is interesting and it is Christ I need to look at if I am really interested in being human. We are all so expert in seeing ourselves and yet our faith is a sustained invitation to see God and one another.

We have to look, really look. Look so that we start expecting to see something else, something different. That can be pretty difficult (as I found during Occupy), but looking we might see in the serpent lifted high or in the sky over Auschwitz another way of being. There is a poem by Ann Lewin about *Prayer* which makes the point and I will end with that.

*Prayer is like watching for the Kingfisher.
All you can do is
Be where he is likely to appear, and
Wait.
Often, nothing much happens;
There is space, silence and*

*Expectancy.
No visible sign, only the
Knowledge that he's been there
And may come again.
Seeing or not seeing cease to matter,
You have been prepared.
But sometimes, when you've almost
Stopped expecting it,
A flash of brightness
Gives encouragement*