

The lifting up of the brazen serpent is one of the most remarkable incidents in the Bible, and easily reveals why it was seized upon by the Evangelists: but John tells us that Jesus himself used it as a vital meditation on his own life; that he himself would be lifted up as a sign of healing in the midst of his people was one of the ways in which he seems to have thought of his leaving Nazareth and what is called *the hidden life*, in order to become a very public person indeed. He called people to him, he gathered large crowds, and he particularly invited and sought out the sick, those who had been bitten by the various serpents that *bring death to many in Israel*. This self-giving is very precise: not a piece of publicity-seeking, but a certainty that he carried in himself the healing the people needed.

None of us can have this feeling as Jesus did; being a Christian means discipleship, not imitation of Jesus. What gave him the certainty that he could help the world was his irreplaceable relationship with God, not an adoptive one like ours, but one which made up the heart of his being, so that wherever he went the power and love of God went with him.

It is a gradual process that leads him to understand that this mission of his would be identical with his foundering as a member of the fallen human race. The more he insisted on his unique role, the more they would insist on his retraction of it, and at last the necessity of his being silenced. Thus his mission becomes identified with his Passion, and he cannot pursue the one without meeting the other.

But rather than treat this as a sinister and depressing story, we should instead accept it as the key to our own encounter with evil. When we find ourselves trapped into bad news and pain, we are being given the friendship of the Christ who is raised up as a spectacle for the bitten people to look on. This, says God, is my beloved Son, in whom is all my delight: listen to him! If Jesus' raising up on the Cross was carried out in hatred, his sending to be in that exalted place is done in divine love. Like Jesus, we can't have the one without the other. This gives meaning to our life that isn't about our own ability to solve our problems, but in the ability of God the Father to make us into a sign of love and trust for each other.

He is from above: his enemies are from below. We must seek our meaning in the hand of God, and not in the minds of the fallen he longs to save.