In Greek Mythology, Asclepius was son the of Apollo - the god of healing.

In the ancient times, was almost always depicted as a middle-aged man holding a rod with a snake rapped around it.

200 Asclepion temples appeared in the ancient world in about 300 BC.

The first representations of the physician-god bearing a rod with a snake twined around it showed up around 200 BC.

The snake symbolizes the snake bite, which was the worst kind of disease someone could have and very difficult to cure.

However, Asclepius had the power to heal even the snake bite.

This rod with the snake is known as the Rod of Asclepius and is even today the symbol of the physicians throughout the world.

Medical alert bracelets today have this very symbol.

So we see this same symbol in the bronze serpent story we hear from the Book of Numbers today.

People were complaining - they were sick of the bread from heaven..

....Moses had led them to freedom out of captivity where they were slaves and starving.

God gave them a leader and fed them whilst they were in the wilderness...

...but they moaned and complained and spoke about the good old days - back in Egypt - that if they were honest, weren’t so good after all.

It is quite a weird story - and there is obviously more to it than the literal words.

What does it mean?

It has to be significant because Jesus refers to it, we have here in the Gospel this morning.

Most of us don't like snakes very much... In the bible they are often symbolic of evil or the devil.

Snakes are not very attractive -they slither around and sneak up on us and they can bite us.

Their bite can be fatal.

Venomous snakebites still kill at least 100,000 people per year – and that’s not just in Australia!

If we were to simply treat the symptoms of a venomous snake bite - the person would certainly die.

Interestingly enough, the anti venom used to treat snake bite is produced by harvesting the venom from the snake and injecting it back into the victim so that the person’s own body produces antibodies to fight the deadly effects of the poison.

So often, even today in the medical world, people’s symptoms are treated, but the cause is rarely identified or treated.

We want a quick fix to the problem rather than a holistic approach which might require more effort and less instantaneous relief.

For example, if you have a headache you can take an Advil to relieve the pain...but the headache returns after about 5 hours (well it was always there - just the pain was masked by the tablets).

You can then take some more tablets, or stronger and stronger tablets - but the cause is never treated.

The tablets can also cause further problems and put stress on your liver and so on.

The cause could have been something as simple as a new perfume you were wearing, or something a little more difficult to identify such as a food additive.

We tend to bandaid the symptoms in life rather than want to look for the cause.

This is true for us on a psychological and spiritual level too.

When we are feeling depressed or sad, or perhaps just a general feeling of dis- ease, there is very likely an underlying cause - something within ourselves that we

haven’t paid attention to and ignored- perhaps treating only the symptoms.

A past hurt or trauma, perhaps something that we have done, that we still feel guilt and remorse for and we push this deep within.

Perhaps it is about the way we are being treated ourselves by another person and allow ourselves to continue to be in that situation, rather than confront the person or remove ourselves from the harm.

\*\* The darkness needs to be brought to the light.

\*\* People treat the symptoms in a variety of ways.

Some people use drugs or alcohol to alleviate their emotional pain, ...Im sure most of us have gone home after a tough day and said “I need a glass of wine!”

....others simply live in denial and push any thoughts of it as far as they can, ....

....and others try to mask it by becoming so busy or working so hard to “make up for it” or block it out.

Again, this only masks the symptoms.. the real issue needs to be faced and addressed.

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It was when the Israelites looked up and cast their eyes upon the horrible snake image that had poisoned them, that they were healed.

They faced the instrument of their wounding.

In my past I worked with people who had lots in common with many of the people I met on the DTES last week with Fr Matthew. People who had experienced trauma, abuse and pain so intense that substance misuse was the only thing that could relieve their pain – despite the risks, despite the brevity of relief.

Back when I worked in the drug and alcohol agency, it was mandatory for all staff, not just the therapists, do undergo further training and personal development. The manager of our branch, Bryan, always insisted we had an excellent diet of reading material and had a good grasp on current research and developments in the field.

The work of Gabor Mate was part of our educational diet. Dr Mate is from Vancouver and is a neuropsychiatrist and General Practitioner and Im sure many of you will be familiar with some of his work.

One of his books was required reading for us ‘ In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts”

I have spoken about his premise before – that addiction is a response to deep psychological pain. Alcohol and opiates are consumed to ease and numb the constant pain that people face.

This is not a solution because it only temporarily relieves the symptoms – it does nothing to actually address the cause of the pain in order to cure it.

Dr Mate , during his extensive experience in medicine and palliative care, discovered that many chronic illnesses and conditions are not genetic or random, but very much connected with the lifestyle and personality of the individual presenting with the disease.

In his book When the Body Says No: Exploring the Stress-Disease Connection (2011).he speaks of the connection being the physical cost of' not saying no' for ALS sufferers.

 When physicians send patients for their initial diagnostic testing to confirm the disease, Dr. Maté reported that the technicians administering the tests consistently and accurately predict who has the disease by how 'nice' they are.

Those that are 'very nice' have it and those that are 'not nice enough' do not. This really speaks to those of us who may be recovering from a culture of 'terminal niceness'. He also talks of obituaries glorifying the deceased's dedication to their profession at the expense of health. One was a woman dying of stage 4 cancer who was praised for working up to the last few days of her death.

There is a powerful connection between body and mind that science is only now taking seriously.

Back in 2011, Dr Mate was facing prosecution because he was using a potent healing plant tea from the Amazon called Ayahuasca –(pronounced ai-ah-wos-ka) as a treatment for people who were chronically addicted and living in DTES where he worked as a physician.

Ayahuasca has been used by shamans in the Amazon for thousands of years and in more recent times it has been found to be helpful for people trying to heal from the trauma and disconnection that has impacted their lives.

Ayahuasca is classified as an entheogen – a plant derived substance that is used in spiritual or religious ceremony and connects people to the divine.

When people participate in these ceremonies, which last several days and take a lot of dietary and psychological preparation, purges and prayer -it has a profound life changing impact on those who seek it. There is also much therapeutic work of integration and reflection undertaken after the experience.

We know that when any stimulus enters the brain, the brain tries to understand it based on previous experiences. We all experience this I’m sure. Think about when you travel somewhere new – if you are like me you are constantly making connections with similar things you have encountered in the past. When I arrived here, “Oh Stanley Park is similar to Kings Park in Perth.” I find myself constantly relating to prior experiences. Its just how the brain works.

This is why childhood trauma is so significant and can have life-long impact on people.

For example, If you are attacked by a dog as a child, your brain may have very few, if any, other dog associations at that stage, so whenever you encounter a dog in future, that imprinted memory is accessed and causes you to fear dogs for the rest of your life.

Even if you can logically recognise that every dog isn’t going to be a threat, your initial reaction could still be one of programmed fear.

And if events are repeated with the same result, the patterns only reinforce their connections, building up like scar tissue.

Ayahuasca is a substance that hyperactivates the entire brain region where we store and process emotional memory, often uncovering long-forgotten memories. When this is revisited, the newer, but more experienced conscious part of the mature brain can temporarily override previously entrenched patterns, allowing for new connections to be made.

Memories can then be reevaluated and experiences addressed with more distance from the reflex reactions to previous trauma. In this example, ayahausca could allow the person who is afraid of dogs to break the fear’s hold on their brain and move past the negative encounter – because they now have a different understanding and experience from when they were attacked as a child.

People treated with ayahuasca typically describe having emerged with new perspectives on past experiences and deeply rooted patterns of behavior.

People who have been healed in this way describe the encounter of the past to be quite terrifying, but once through that, reconnection and deep healing is recognised.

It seems that in order to be healed, made whole, we must be willing to come face to face with our deepest pain.

Jesus comes to us showing us the deep love and acceptance of the creator who loves us all unconditionally.

God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that we may have eternal life – have life in abundance.

In the Gospel, Jesus on the cross becomes the suffering symbol - Jesus lifted high upon a pole. This is such a powerful image. There is so much richness here.

Lent is a time to repent - to turn around, to face ourselves, our demons, our snakes, our darkness and our longing to be made whole.

By looking to Jesus on the cross we can be healed - transformed.

For me when I look at the cross- Jesus’ death shows me that God knows the depths of my pain and the pain of the world.

God knows what it is like to suffer, to be betrayed by those closest to him, rejected and tortured.

God knows how empty the darkness can be and what it feels like to be utterly alone.

This is what we enter and reflect on during Holy Week.

When I look at the cross, I see how God is one with all those who suffer in the world.

…Those children who suffer in war zones, and all those who are abused in distant lands and on our doorsteps.

I am brought face to face with the fact that I am human and I too am responsible for the pain of others, I am part of the systems that perpetuate poverty and inequality .....and I am confronted by my own brokenness and sin.

And I know that the only way for me to be whole, is to face these things - and to look to Jesus.

In Jungian psychology wholeness comes through integration - through embracing the shadow... casting off the Ego or False Self.

But this really requires us to do our inner work and to face the darker parts of our life that we might want to pretend are not there.

Facing the darkness is sometimes frightening, but God is in the shadows too.

Sometimes we project our darkness on others and blame them or focus on the darkness in others rather than face our own.

Often we cover up the symptoms by looking good and keeping busy - but deep inside we know -...

.... and at times it can be difficult to keep the lid on it all.

Lent provides us with an opportunity to work on this - to face this.

Repent - to turn around - to face the cross - to face ourselves and to become whole.