The district or the county I come from is well known for poisonous snakes for all over India. Each year many people die of snake bites. Since people are primitive, and medical facilities are not available close by, they use their traditional methods to cure a snake bite.

One example is one someone is bitten by snake a village doctor is called. He just blows air and sweeps at the area of snake bite continuously with the intention of getting out the snake venom out of victim’s body by blowing air and sweeping out the venom. And often times it works.

I myself was bitten twice by poisonous snakes, each time I was saved by one of these primitive methods. There is no scientific explanation to these methods used by these primitive people to cure snake bites.

Same was true with the Israelites. No science can explain how by gazing a bronze serpent on a pole saved the people who were bitten by fiery serpents.

Today’s second and third readings speak of salvation with the imagery of snakes and leaders: Moses and Jesus. “The Son of Man must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

Jesus refers to a familiar event of Israelite salvation history (Num 21:4-9). When the Israelites complained in the desert, God punished them by sending poisonous serpents that bit them. Many perished. But, when the people asked for forgiveness, God told Moses to fashion a bronze serpent and place it on a pole. All those bitten would gaze at it and be saved.

Actually, it was not the bronze serpent on the pole which saved them but it was God himself who saved them. They were bitten by serpents because they had turned away from God. While gazing at the bronze serpent, they repented for their sins and turned back to God. And that is why God saved them because of their repentance.

Similarly, the primitive methods to cure snake bites may not directly cure the victims. But this drives away the fear and cultivate faith. Often just out of fear and nervousness a person bitten by nonpoisonous snake can die. May be that is why people get healed by snake bites even by these primitive methods.

Evangelist John interprets Jesus’ cross in terms of the salvation from snakebite. But Jesus’ cross stands aloft symbolizing salvation not because death is beautiful (it is not), but, because it bespeaks the ‘power of love”: In the responsorial verse we heard, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.”

 In childhood, many of us might have enjoyed playing ‘snakes and ladders. The dice is cast, and one hopes to reach ‘Home’ before the others by avoiding snakes, ascending ladders. Some of those snakes were big; some, small. Even close to ‘Home’, one could suddenly be bitten by a snake and tumble down. Life is like that! As the bronze-serpent signified salvation for the Israelites, the cross, like a ladder, leads us to eternal home.

A bronze-serpent saved the Israelites and aboriginal people get saved by primitive methods from snake bites. Similarly, we have the chance to be saved by the cross. Together with Mary we also stand beneath the cross. This is the salvific ladder which will eventually lead us to our eternal home. But we also need to return to God as the Israelites did.