

Good Friday, 29 March 2024
Church of the Resurrection, Macedon
Rev Charles Potter

I will never forget the sermons of one of my classmates at theological college. He was from the Philippines. Immaterial information really. In the course on preaching we were regularly given the assignment of choosing a bible verse and writing a 5 minute sermon, and then preaching it to the class. My classmate would always chose John 3.16, every time it was his turn. He could not suppress his joy over that verse, even when the professor challenged him to please try something else next time.

And it probably is a world favourite:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

In a few minutes we are going to spend time in adoration of the cross. If one is not a believer, this is a really hard thing to understand. I want to do it today in the light of that verse, for God so loved the world.

It is a verse filled with hope. But how closely have we read John 3.16 and its context? From my reading I have discovered that it could really turn out to be our least favourite bible verse. For two reasons.

The first is this: God comes across as loving everyone, yes? That's no surprise; we certainly believe that about God, without distinction or favour. The surprise is that it is put so strongly. It would seem very reasonable for us to conclude that God's love will win in the end over everything, so intense is his love. Which is very good news.

But what about all the bad people? Does God love them too? If God loves the world, that must necessarily be true. What about the final separation of the sheep and goats in the last judgement? If God so loves the world, should anybody be classed as a goat and have to go to the other place?

John goes on to say that 'everyone who believes in him will have eternal life.' So those who don't believe in him will have a different future, something different from eternal life. Ok, that seems to fit with our expectation of a sifting in judgement.

But as we read still further he says, 'God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.' God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world. There it is again. It sounds very much as if love will triumph over everything. Everything and everyone will be won for God. But don't we still want to know what will happen to those who don't believe in the Son?

For them, says John, the judgement to come is not condemnation and punishment but a crisis of their own making. Those who do not believe in the Son, he says, love the darkness more than the light. The crisis that is happening for them already is that they are allowed to remain in their darkness, by their choice. God comes in love to bring us out of darkness into light, to turn our tragedies into victories. But those who reject the light, or hide from the light, are allowed to stay there, and this creates a crisis for them. But God's Son did not come to condemn them - they are in the darkness by their own choosing. Yet God still loves them.

Here is the big challenge in being a Christian: Are we ready for love which does not condemn? Can we be a people who are so like God that we do not judge and condemn? That we do not try to work out who is in and who is out? I know it is one of my own weaknesses. Do we allow God to love everyone through us?

The other surprising thing about this most well-known of bible verses is that God comes showing us his power through his vulnerability. 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.' His Son is given, given over to live the hardships we live. His Son makes himself as nothing when he dies on a cross. This confronts and challenges all the world's values. Who wants to be as nothing? Certainly not me, most of the time.

It is extraordinary how God makes himself as nothing through his Son. It happens like this: God does not ask our permission before he sends his Son in love into our world. So he accepts the fact that he might be rejected by us.

I think I have felt the irony of this at times, I just never saw it so clearly in writing before. God doesn't ask our permission if his Son might die for us. Dear Charles, would you mind if Jesus dies for you, because you are quite in need of redemption? No, God didn't ask, he just did it.

The divine rescue is not in our hands. We have no control over it. And this just goes against everything to do with the way we live today. The very last thing we want for ourselves is to be weak or vulnerable. We are absorbed all of the time in comparing ourselves to others.

In our world we seek control over everything. We control our environment (although not very well). We seek our own security. And we seek to hide our vulnerability from others.

As I was reflecting on this recently, I stumbled into it. I happened to go for a blood test. You may know how afterwards you are given a little glob of cotton wool that is stuck on your arm with a piece of tape. I was wearing a T-shirt that day; it was lovely and warm outside. I needed to pick up a few things from the shops. But I thought, I don't want anyone to see me in public with this bit of cotton wool on my arm. It says there is something wrong with me. So I went straight home instead. I didn't want to expose my weakness. We hide our weaknesses from each other and from God.

When God says he sent his Son for us, is it no wonder so many people run for cover? God didn't ask us if we have a need, he just assumes it. It says we have a need, that we are weak in some way, that we are vulnerable. God invades our self-sufficient space, that space in which we firmly want to believe that we are ok. We have spent years creating that space, and it is ours. God giving us his Son threatens to make a claim on our space, this love we didn't ask for.

So John 3.16 could be our least favourite bible verse. In the face of the unconditional love of God we are powerless. It threatens to make us lovely. And only when we have died to all of our delusions of actually being in control of our lives do we realise a great truth - the loss of our supposed freedom and power is actually life giving.

So yes, God loved the world so much that he gave us his Son. So that we might have eternal life. And so we might know the truth about God and also know the truth about ourselves, and be set free in that truth, and grow in that love.

