

Sermon, St German's Cathedral, 5th March 2023

Readings: Genesis 12:1-4a; John 3:1-17

Today's Gospel reading contains the world's favourite verse. How do we know? Well, it is searched for more than 2 million times every month, and videos with the hashtag J316 have been viewed more than 55 million times. And if you're wondering which verse it is, well it's John 3:16:

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

These 27 words contain the heart of the Christian Gospel. Our faith is based on the amazing love of God. When I'm out walking I see this in the delicacy of the blades of grass, in the coconut aroma of gorse, in the shape of the hills, in the cry of the choughs, in the swell of the ocean, or the breath of the wind, or the clouds scudding across the sky. I'm amazed by the diversity of insect life, by the way everything fits together, the way day follows night, the phases of the moon, and that spring follows winter. It's extraordinary! And all crafted through God's practical love.

And this amazing world is our home.

God didn't just love the physical world, or the flora and fauna which inhabit it, he loves us too.

Would that we had cared for each other and our environment with the same love that God has for us! We only have to look at, listen to or read the news this weekend to find many problems that have resulted:

- Matt Hancock and his WhatsApp messages
- The death of a baby
- The conviction of a lawyer for murdering his family
- Bloody battles in the Ukraine
- Refugees being sent back

But God's love transcends all our failings. He sent his Son, Jesus, to enable us to have eternal life.

If we go back and look at the context of this verse, we meet Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee. He had been trained in Jewish law and respected all the oral traditions as well as what was written in the Torah (the first five books of the Bible). He was a bit of a stickler for doing things properly. He had been keeping his eyes and ears open when it came to Jesus, and had come to the conclusion that he must have come from God because of all the things he did and said. Notice how he addresses him with respect, calling him Rabbi which equals Teacher. But he was confused because Jesus didn't fit in to any pigeon hole that he could think of. He was intrigued. And he was open-minded.

We are told that their encounter took place at night. I've often heard it said this was because Nicodemus didn't want to be seen talking with Jesus. That may be true. But it gets dark much earlier in Israel than it does here and I can imagine the opportunity for relaxed conversation away from the crowds that gathered during the day. Because Nicodemus was seriously interested. He wasn't trying to trip Jesus up, or make his own points. He really wanted to know and to understand.

Jesus cuts to the chase, and begins to talk about the Kingdom of God. With his knowledge of what we call the Old Testament, Nicodemus might well have thought back to Daniel who told King Nebuchadnezzar that his kingdom would be succeeded by 3 more kingdoms and finally that the God of heaven would set up a kingdom that would never be destroyed, but would endure for ever.

Nicodemus might also have listened to Jesus talking about the Kingdom of Heaven – likening it to situations his audience would be familiar with – a lost coin, hidden treasure, a beautiful pearl, a group of bridesmaids – and various aspects of farming. But Jesus also taught that the kingdom was for unlikely recipients. It wasn't the priests and pharisees that topped the list but rather the poor in spirit and those who are persecuted for being righteous (Matt 5: 3+10).

In Jesus's time, the Jews were looking for God's promised Messiah but they were expecting him as a conquering king. Jesus takes Nicodemus by surprise when he says that in order to see the Kingdom of God it's necessary to be born again – or "born from above" as our translation puts it. He explains that when a baby is born the mother's waters have to break – all that protective fluid needs to be released for the birth to take place. That is physical birth. What Jesus is talking about is spiritual birth. And, just as we still can't tell where the wind comes from and blows to, so the Holy Spirit is a bit of a mystery. We know that he is an integral part of who God is. This essence of God is given to us when we become children of God. God's character being developed within each of us; his strength supporting us in all the challenges we meet; his personality reaching out to those around us; his love flowing through us to others.

But all this comes at a cost. Jesus looks forward to his own death when he talks of being lifted up, just like the snake that Moses raised up on a pole. You may remember that while the Israelites were wandering through the desert they often complained, and one time it was about the lack of bread and water – they were not trusting God to provide for them. God sent a plague of snakes which caused the Israelites to realise what they had done wrong. When they repented, God told Moses to create a bronze snake and lift it high so that those who had been bitten could look at it and be healed.

So today we are encouraged to face the things that we do wrong; to turn away from them and to look up at Jesus on the cross. To believe that he is the one who can accept us as we are, and to enable us to grow to our full potential; that he was willing to be crucified so that we can all live. And as we are born anew, we receive the Holy Spirit to live within us, to teach us more about God and to enable us to help create the Kingdom of God right here in Peel.

Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man in John 3: 14 and as the Son of God in John 3:16. It is a unique position, and one which his disciples battled to grasp. When faced by Jesus walking on the whipped up waves of the Sea of Galilee and witnessing them abate when he joins them in the boat they exclaim: *Truly you are the son of God!* And a little later in Matthew's Gospel (16:16) when asked by Jesus who his disciples thought he was, Peter responds with: *You are the Christ, the son of the living God!* And yet they didn't fully understand and, when he was on trial for his life, they abandoned him.

But Nicodemus never forgot his encounter with Jesus. It was he who brought the spices with which to anoint the body of Jesus after his crucifixion, working with his friend Joseph, who came from Arimathea. They got permission to take Jesus down from the cross; they went against Jewish tradition which denied honourable burial to those who had been executed.

So what might we take away from the Gospel today? Here are some suggestions:

- Have you struggled to work out what it means to be born again, but would like to follow Jesus better? How about going to chat and pray with those who'll be waiting after the service? Grab a cup of tea or coffee and join them.
- If you are confident to say for yourself that Jesus is the Son of God, could you find a way of sharing that with one person this week. It might be as simple as writing out the words of

John 3:16 and giving them to someone, telling them that it's the most popular verse in the Bible and you thought they might like a copy of it.

- Think about one thing you could do this week to specifically reflect the values of the Kingdom of God. We are called to love our neighbours; how could you show compassion for a neighbour this week?
- Maybe go for a walk and actively enjoy the beauty of God's creation

It would be great to encourage each other next Sunday by sharing how we have been promoting the Kingdom of God this week. And there's nothing to stop us from reflecting on last week right now, and perhaps we'll have something to share over coffee at the end of the service.

Amen

Rosemary Clarke

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