

Sunday 16 September 2024

A sermon preached by the Revd Canon Prof. Dorothy Lee FAHA on Holy Cross Day, at St Paul's Cathedral.

Readings: Numbers 21:4b-9; Philippians 2:5-11; John 3:13-17

I. Today's readings give us the most important verse in the Bible, at least according to some people: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that whoever believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.' It's a verse that's associated particularly with Billy Graham and evangelistic crusades and with the tracts that people used to give out on street corners – and may still do, for all I know.

Of course, it's wonderful that people value such a verse from St John's Gospel and see how central it is. And it's great that people can even give chapter and verse: John 3:16!

At the same time, there's a bit of a problem with this approach — and it's probably the same whenever we seize on a particular, solitary verse from the Bible: that is, we fail to see it in its context within the text. And setting this verse in its context will give us a richer understanding of its meaning. That's especially so for us today as we celebrate Holy Cross day and focus on the crucifixion and its significance for us. So let's look again at our key verse and see what we can draw from it.

II. In the first place, John 3:16 is not actually about the greatness of God's love — "God loved the world so much" — but rather how God loves the world. We could paraphrase it: 'This is the way God loved the world'. In other words, it focusses on the manner in which God shows self-giving love in Jesus.

Now the cross in John's Gospel is the climax of what begins in the incarnation, that is God becoming flesh. God's saving and life-giving glory is present from Jesus' human birth and throughout his life and ministry, and ultimately in his triumphant death.

And talking of the how of God's love leads us to the question of how we know and experience that love. There are many ways we can touch that divine love, above all, we meet it in the Eucharist, in Holy Communion, where we encounter God's self-giving in material form, in ways we can see and touch and taste: in bread and wine, in flesh and blood, at the altar-table of God's love.

Furthermore, it's a gift that is given in the here-and-now. It's not 'everlasting' life that God gives us after we die, but 'eternal life' in the present moment; eternal life that fills us now with God's joy and peace; eternal life that holds us through suffering and pain and death; eternal life that triumphs, both now and in the age to come.

In God's way of showing love, we will not be lost, we will not perish, but will have eternal life.

III. The second point about our text, John 3:16, is that it's not a threat aimed at unbelievers: a threat that they will be ultimately be lost for all eternity, which is how it has sometimes been used. Look at the equally significant verse that follows: 'Indeed God did not send the

Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world should be saved through him.' John 3:17 should always be quoted alongside John 3:16 because it makes clear that God is not in the business of condemnation.

In fact, God's yearning, God's desire, is for the salvation of the whole world, including creation itself and not just human beings. God doesn't want anyone or anything that God has created to be lost. Later in the Gospel Jesus bewails the loss of Judas Iscariot. It's not something he wants to happen. He loves Judas, he washes Judas' feet at the Last Supper, he gives him the morsel before he leaves, he allows Judas his free will to betray him. That's true love.

In other words, God will do everything possible to bring about salvation and to avoid condemnation for anyone. Indeed, God has done everything already: God in Jesus has become flesh and has died for the sake of the world's salvation.

III. The third point about our special verse — or rather our two special verses (John 3:16-17) — is that they're set within the Old Testament story of the exodus and especially the symbolism of Moses and the serpent.

The serpent, as our first reading tells us, was lifted up in the wilderness to save the people of Israel from poisonous snake bites. Gazing on the bronze serpent was enough to heal those bitten. And in John's Gospel Jesus is literally lifted up on the cross and John exploits that imagery and sees its parallel with the exodus story. Gazing on the crucified Christ is, in the same way, healing and life-giving for us.

Strangely enough, the basic image for Christ in this passage is that of a serpent. In some Indigenous myths, the rainbow serpent is an image of new life because of the way it sheds its skin and emerges in a new body. Some Indigenous people have spoken of this as a point of convergence between biblical spirituality and Indigenous: Christ, the great rainbow serpent, gains new life in the resurrection and so gives us eternal life. The serpent image in John's Gospel also parallels that of Christ as the lamb of God who takes away the world's sin. The imagery shows exactly how God loves the world and how God does everything for its salvation.

IV. The main thing we celebrate today is the wondrous life that God gives us in Jesus — in his incarnation, in life and ministry, in his death and resurrection — is achieved through, and only through, death. The Orthodox churches have an Easter chant they sing:

*Christ is risen from the dead,
Trampling down death by death,
And upon those in the tombs bestowing life.*

'Trampling down death by death' — that's the triumph of the cross, that's the source of our life: life-given-through-death.

St Paul puts it well in the hymn he quotes in Philippians. It begins with a downward descent: God in Christ becomes human, becomes a slave to human frailty and mortality, experiences death – and not just any death, but a shameful and painful death: even death on the cross (and we think Paul probably added those words to the original hymn).

But the cross also the turning-point from which we ascend upwards: he's raised from death, exalted at God's hand, given the name above all other names ('Lord'), and worshipped by all creation. The cross lies at the centre of this descent and ascent. The cross turns evil and suffering, sin and death on their heads, making life the final victor, for us and for all creation.

V. Today we celebrate, once again, God's love for us and for the whole creation. We celebrate how that love has led to the incarnation and the cross. And we re-read our two key texts from John's Gospel (3:16-17) in the light of that loving desire for the salvation of all living creatures; we read them through the lens of powerful Old Testament imagery.

And today we're also invited to accept that life-giving love, the life that came about through death, perhaps for the first time or perhaps at a deeper level in our lives; and we're invited to share it with others, in gracious words, in kindly deeds, in action for justice. Our prayer today is that our lives may live out our thanksgiving to God for the gift of the holy cross.

Thanks be to God.