

Sermon – 10 Mar. 24 Jn 3.14-21; Eph 2.1-10; Num 21.4-9

The hope and assurance of God's love for the world

Lord, give us grace this morning that we would be both hearers and doers of the Word. And may our obedience in both listening and living bring glory to You.

'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.'

The first time I remember seeing John 3:16 appear was in the 1993 film *Cool Runnings*, about the first Jamaican Bobsled team to enter the Winter Olympics at Calgary in 1988. Last week, I watched the original footage of the actual team competing and can confirm the Disney movie accurately portray the crowd holding a John 3:16 sign. When I saw that readings for today and saw John 3.16 is a part of it, my initial reaction was a bit of a 'why this' moment; there are some readings preachers would really rather avoid, and this verse appeared to be one of mine!?!? Quite simply, this is due to the cliched and idealised nature that this verse has become. Think of all the times you've seen John 3:16 outside of a church setting – in movies and popular culture, even used in tattoos.

When I started reading about this passage further, there were those who wrote on John 3.16 in isolation, as if this verse was the only set reading for today. This brought back a memory of reading many years ago of the claim that you could 'convert' someone using only this verse. John 3.16 is certainly an excellent summation of God's word, and while this intention is pertinent, I feel that the verse helps to reassure those of faith, rather than bring non-believers to Christ.

There is always a danger of reading Biblical verses in isolation. It becomes problematic when we interpret the verse to mean something that the author didn't; that God doesn't intend. If we are able to take all 7 verses of today's Gospel passage together, we might find some new ideas. This also helps to avoid the some of the ideas I read that have arisen when focussing on 3.16 as the centre of the message. Instead of the simplistic views that God sent Jesus to save the earth with love and sacrifice without trying to get rid of the world's evil, but by magically saving people who "believed" in him, or that Jesus is teaching about solely about judgement; we can draw from this passage a message of hope and assurance, of mercy and compassion.

Let's look first at verses 14 & 15, ... *just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.* Here, Jesus refers to God providing Moses a way to save the Israelites from the poisonous serpents that have come in an Egyptian plague like manner in Numbers 21.4-9. Upon Moses praying to God on behalf of the impatient and complaining Israelites, God tells Moses to make a bronze serpent, and raise it up on a pole. Now, once the Israelites are bitten, they look up to bronze serpent and are saved. Jesus links this OT scripture to his own being raised on the cross. Straight away we can see why this Gospel passage is included in Lent. During Lent, we contemplate and prepare to come into the mystery of Easter, thinking about our own sin and how God sent Jesus to save us from our sins. And here Jesus is telling us to look to the cross - the very thing that symbolises for us God's saving gift of grace. Just as the Israelites had to look up to the raised serpent to receive life-saving benefits, so too must the Son of Man be lifted up and

exalted, so those who believe can be saved from their sins and receive eternal life.

Cast our minds to verses forward to 17-21. We can see how focussing on the cross, believing in Christ's sacrifice when being raised up on the cross, saves us from condemnation. This section of the reading can be reasonably considered to be about judgement. However, we can also look at these verses as building our faith in the hope we place in God's gift of grace, and God's desire for us to be reconciled to him. Again, Jesus' inference of being raised on the cross is at the centre of the point he makes. *'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.'*

In our NT reading, Paul reveals the crosses' central role. Jesus Christ is the means through which reconciliation with God is achieved. Paul writes in verses 4-5, *God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by grace you have been saved.* We know that through accepting the grace is what saves us, and Paul intimates in verse 10 the human response that is required of God's offer of grace – to have faith and believe.

This year I have started to fix my routine, which includes getting up before 6am each morning during the week. I haven't done this regularly since before Covid happened, and while this is still a work in progress, I realised I missed being up early: particularly at this time of the year. The mornings I am up at this time, I prefer to be outside as the sun rises, and the light begins to fill the sky. I find when there is natural sunlight, rather than being inside, or under a cloud covered sky, I feel more motivated

and have a greater sense of calm. In many ways, I am better prepared for the day ahead, hopeful for a good day with my time well spent.

I prefer to spend time in light generally. Even when inside a building, if light is streaming in through the window, I feel more positive. I feel more hopeful and assured. In the past I have romanticised my preference for being in light with that of the many images of Jesus talking about and contrasting light and darkness. One of my go-to passages in recent times has been Jesus talking about being a *light in the world*, that shines so as to attract and draw people to God in Matt 5.14-16. I have to tell you that this is very much a personal thing – when reading over my sermon [Ellen added, “my amazing incredible wife prefers the darkness, she gets a sense of calm and peacefulness from the reduction of sensory input, so as she points out I really shouldn’t make these generalisations \(she writes, sitting in the dark\).”](#)

In verses 19-21, Jesus again alludes to light and darkness. Only this time it is in support to the point he is making about those who believe, and those who are non-believers, providing some insight into why people may believe or not. Firstly, verses 14-21 are the second part of a conversation Jesus is having with Nicodemus; a Pharisee who we are told is a leader of the Jews. Nicodemus has come to Jesus under the cover of darkness. Many have made a connection with Nicodemus night-time visit and Jesus alluding to the darkness as a way for people to hide their *evil deeds*. It is reasonable to consider Nicodemus came at night to hide his visit to Jesus – the point being that he is willing to accept Jesus’ claims about himself, but not so publicly. So, is his faith not strong enough in Jesus and to completely accept God’s gift of grace? Nicodemus confidently asserts he knows who Jesus is in verse 2. If we

are like Nicodemus here, we may find our attitudes and assumptions stand in the way of completely accepting and experiencing the gift of Jesus this text offers.

Secondly, the darkness and light are an important way to properly understand the difference between those who believe and those who don't - those who are to be condemned. John's Gospel attempts to provide an answer to why people are drawn to the light and others who withdraw from it. Along the way attending to the friction between God's desire for the world's salvation and the world's ignorance and rejection of God's offer. To love darkness, to hide away so one's acts cannot be seen shows a lack of belief and so the one is condemned. The way a person acts in the presence of light is significant in forming a person's identity and perhaps even their strength of character.

At this point in Lent, this Gospel passage can really help us to focus on the cross. God so loves the world and he sends his child to "repair" it, to save it from itself. To change the world or save it requires a process that ends hate, injustice and oppression, and replace it with justice, compassion, mercy, love, and equality. However, verses 19-21 tell us that some choose the hate that comes with darkness over the truth that is revealed in light, evil deeds over good deeds, and therefore they reject the light of the son of God. Others, however, agree with Jesus' mission to change or restore the world to its original intent from a world full of evil and injustice to a loving, just and caring world. Therefore, for John, believing in Jesus has more to do with what people believe rather an idealistic view of possible "religious" conversion.

I believe this passage offers us so much more than the idealisation that John 3.16 has become – that God loves the world so much that Jesus comes to the world to offer us hope of freedom of sin, of mercy and compassion, of justice and love for those who don't receive because of the darkness of the world. God's mercy is evident in the lifting up of the Son on the cross, the visible sign of God's grace poured out for the world. This creates for us a possible turning point; a decisive moment that we might perceive and receive God's redemptive, life changing love. Believing in God's redemptive, life changing love, provides us with hope and the assurance of eternal life to come.

I would like to finish this morning sharing a prayer written by Safina Stewart. Safina is a Wuthithi and Mabuiag Island woman who contributes to the work of Common Grace as the Relationships and Storytelling Coordinator.

Loving Jesus,

Thank you for championing and companioning us in our walk of life. You journey with us in the inner landscapes of darkness and confusion, and light up steps for a new living way that you open up to us.

We pray that you would help us hold unswervingly to this hope we have in you. Please help us live out our faith in you authentically. Our confident hope is because of you.

May we seek to encourage, care for, and welcome one another as we connect and journey together in faith - spurring each other on to live the life of flourishing, love, and justice that you made possible through your example, sacrifice, and love.

Amen