

Sermon on John 3:16, Lent 4, March 10, 2024

Today we have that famous gospel reading that is quoted all over on billboards and at sports events and everywhere else: John 3:16. "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." But my favourite verse in this passage is the next one, "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 many ways, these verses sum up our faith.

The first thing to notice is that God's motivation for all this is love. Love for the whole world. That is not the impression you would probably get from many televangelists, but that's what the Bible says. God sent his Son because he loves us and wants us to have eternal life, wants us to be saved. Saved in Greek also means healed, delivered from danger. And eternal life here doesn't mean unending life, and it doesn't mean life after death. It means a different quality of life, life with an eternal nature, rather than a passing nature. It's sharing God's life and for us, it starts here and now, and then goes on eternally.

And to receive this, all we need to do is believe in Jesus. That is, entrust ourselves to him, trust him. It's not, in this context, about believing a list of stuff about Jesus. It's about having faith in him personally. Enough faith to follow him.

When you put this all together, you actually get an idea of what St. Paul is talking about to the Ephesians. He says we all used to be dead in our sins, following the ways of this world, the desires of our primitive selves, but God gave us life by his grace, the same life that God shares with the Son and Spirit, this life is now also ours to share. And we get this by God's grace and by faith in Jesus.

So, God loves us so much that he sent his Son Jesus to offer us this new kind of life, this new way of living, to offer us the opportunity to share in the life essence of God instead of just ordinary life of the kind any creature on earth has. Unlike ordinary life, which we give up when we die, God's life is eternal. It starts now and carries on after we die.

But God, because God loves us and is not a coercive God, allows us the option to say yes or no to the eternal life we are offered. And if we say no, this passage tells us, we will be condemned and judged, not to go to hell after we die, and by the way, this passage doesn't even mention hell, but we will be condemned to keep walking in the darkness, to keep on living without sharing God's eternal life. In other words, if we say no to God's gift, God will not force it onto us but will allow us to live without it. God will allow us to walk in darkness, as John puts it, or to continue enslaved to sinful nature as Paul puts it. That's it. But the offer stays open.

This relates to what Rev. Heather was talking about last week. Following Jesus looks pretty foolish to the world. It is definitely counter-cultural. It means not putting our own selves at the centre of our universe. It means loving everyone, including our enemies, people who hurt us. It means caring as much about other people as about ourselves. And

when we are walking in the light of God's eternal life, this makes total sense. But from the darkness it makes no sense at all.

"Who's going to look after me, look after my interests, if I don't look after myself?" It doesn't occur to those in the darkness that we might have a whole loving community to look after us. I was reading yesterday about the early church in Acts. They didn't consider their own property to be just theirs but they shared it with the whole church, so there was not a needy person among them. Wow! Imagine what that would be like.

And this choice is offered to us every day. It's not a one off. Every day, Jesus offers us the choice of trusting in him and following him and sharing in his eternal life or alternatively, we can step back in fear and anxiety and choose to do things the way the whole world does, putting our faith in money or property or perhaps our family alone to keep us safe in this world. We can choose to love each other or to defend ourselves against each other, in case we might get hurt. We can choose to help each other, or to keep what we have for a rainy day, in case we might find ourselves in need later with no one to help us. Which makes total sense from a worldly perspective. But that's not God's perspective.

When I was in college, I used to belong to a Mennonite Church and believe me, they take helping each other very seriously. Small example. A couple of our members were going off somewhere and asked me to house sit and of course I said yes. And they lent me their car, because they lived out in the country and why should it be sitting there? Because I had a car, I could move quite a few of my boxes into storage at one of our member's business. Norm had space in his store rooms to store my stuff – I was moving out here at the time. So I dropped everything off, and then came out and found a flat tire. So Norm came out and changed the tire for me. Because he had done that, I was able to give another church person a ride to an appointment. Mutual help and assistance. It becomes a web of good will and loving care. And that web becomes an insurance policy against the various things that happen to us in life.

You've all seen this in your own lives. People in the church help each other when we need help. Whether that's bringing food when someone has suffered a bereavement or giving someone a ride to church, or whatever. Our Food Bank is a way we have to help people in the wider community. One of our Arabic speaking clients was so grateful she volunteered to help us with translation. We let the Cadets use our hall and they have helped with our fundraisers. Kindness has a way of multiplying and spreading. And when we are part of that, we are living in the Kingdom of God, we are living in the eternal quality of life that Jesus offers us.

This is a choice we make day by day. It's the choice to follow Jesus in all our decisions. To trust that the way Jesus tells us to live is ultimately the best way, for us and for those around us. We're watching the Chosen right now, and it's kind of funny seeing the disciples that Jesus calls, right at the beginning. They have no clue. They keep making suggestions for ways he could do things better, from their perspective, and he keeps doing things his way. But they stick with him and as they follow him, they begin to gradually understand the rationale for what he's doing. It begins to make some sense to them. We haven't got to that part yet. At first it is just blind faith because they had met him and were

so impressed, and they were still in the habit of doing things the way the world does them. But gradually, as they keep following Jesus and listening to him, it starts to make sense. Well, that's what we're called to do. Stick with Jesus and follow him, even if the world, and the inner voice of our own worldly nature, thinks we're foolish. And when we go astray, as we will, come back.

So how do we apply this in our lives? Well, here's an example. A number of people have said to me that they are feeling anxious about the upcoming interim time, between when I retire and when you find a new Rector. It's a time of uncertainty. The last interim was not entirely a happy time. Some very good things happened, eg. you kept things like the Bible Study going throughout, which is unusual in a long interim. But, for many people it was pretty hard and there was definitely some conflict. And the thought of another interim is triggering some people's anxiety. But an unhappy interim is not something that is inevitable. It is not something that will happen to you whether you want it or not. The interim is going to happen, but what that looks and feels like is entirely up to you. I think you've got this! Because you know how to follow Jesus and I believe you want to, at least most of the time. All of us have our moments when we go astray.

You have the power to make this interim a good time. An interim is a time to take stock, to pray for God's leading. It's a time to examine ourselves and ask, "Who are we now? What are our strengths and weaknesses? And what is God calling us to become? Where is God leading us now?" And you can do that by following Jesus' ways, by truly listening to each other, by loving each other, caring for each other, forgiving each other. And praying a lot together for God to help you. That's what saying yes to eternal life would mean in this context. That's what walking in the light, in the grace of God, would mean in this context. And if you choose to do that, you don't have to fear the darkness. You really don't.

This time is no different from any other time in that respect: we can choose to trust Jesus and follow Jesus, or we can decide that it's not safe or sensible to do that and we can revert to following the world's ways. This is the choice before us each day, both collectively as a church and individually. Each one of us can choose to follow Jesus even if some days it looks like some other people have gone astray. Doesn't matter. We can still choose to love each other and care for each other, even when that's difficult.

And sometimes it might be hard. Some days someone will be having a bad day and will say something rude or do something nasty. Human nature, the nature we share with all the animals, is that if someone snaps at you, snap back. Preferably snap back harder. In fact, if you can totally take them out, you won't have to worry about them anymore. We've all seen this sort of thing. The end is not pretty. It's a typical response if we're living according to worldly values: see how much you can damage the person, spread rumours, ostracise them, be rude and nasty to them. Hurt them more than they hurt you. Then everyone ends up hurt. But we don't have to play that game, and if we're following Jesus, we won't play that game. If we do sometimes slip into it, we can always stop and turn back to Jesus.

When we're following Jesus, we might try to engage people having a bad day, try to understand them, see past the surface to what's really worrying them, be there for them,

forgive them. Because Jesus came to love us, not to condemn us, to set us free and heal us and save us from all this stuff, if only we will trust him. Following him means doing that, too. In the days to come, and indeed always, I hope we will all choose to follow Jesus day by day, to accept the eternal life he is offering us, to walk in the light he brings with his presence. Because God loves us and that is what God wants for us. And ultimately, there is nothing better than to share in God's eternal life and love.