

Sermon 10 March 2024 'God so loved the world...'

Numbers 21:4-9 John 3:14-21

John begins by referring to the rather strange story we heard told in Numbers. He takes that story and uses it as a kind of parable of Jesus. The serpent was lifted up, the men looked at it, their thoughts became focussed on him and so we find eternal life.

We then come to the verse which must be one of the most well-known verses in the Bible; a verse which really is the essence of the Gospel. *'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.'*

Let's begin with the words, *'For God so loved the world...'* In these few words we see God from a slightly different perspective than we do in the Old Testament, where God is seen as attempting to bring his people to heel, as a loving parent often has to. God has a challenge on his hands as the Israelites were constantly disobeying him.

This was especially the case during their time of wandering in the desert. At one stage, he got fed up with their ungratefulness and unleashed his wrath upon them. *'But while they were still eating the meat, the anger of the Lord blazed against the people, and he caused a severe plague to break out amongst them.'* Numbers 11:33. Incidents of the Israelites incurring the wrath of God crop up quite frequently in the Old Testament.

This text, *'For God so loved the world,'* shows God, not acting to bring a universe to heel, but rather to satisfy his love. He loves each and every one of us, and he wants us to love him back. He wants us on his side. And when you think about it, the most effective way of getting someone on your side, is to love them. Love is hard to refuse.

I want to focus for a moment on the next few words in this verse, *'...that he gave his only Son.'* So how does God convey this love to us? How does he make it abundantly clear to us just what this love looks like? What better way than have someone just like us to demonstrate and teach us just what this love looks like in our everyday lives? So, he has this brilliant idea – 'I will reproduce myself in human form. Surely, they can't help but relate to me if I am just like them.' And so we have the person of Jesus! Voila!

Now, apart from role-modelling the kind of love God wants us to practise in our lives, and trust me, that's hugely important, what does this mean to us? For starters, we are told this will lead to eternal life: *'...so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.'* Well, that is certainly something to look forward to, and without wanting to put a dampener on proceedings, some of us would be looking forward to that with perhaps more anticipation than others! But what about here and now? God has sent us his Son, Jesus – what do we stand to gain from that in our everyday lives? It is a massive question and not one which can be adequately answered in a few sentences.

Not so long ago I was speaking with someone who was facing a few challenges in her life. She said to me, 'How lucky we are to have faith. It really does bring meaning into our lives and helps us to deal with those inevitable challenges we face in life.' What more can I say?

Christ is our link with God. It is through Christ that we relate to God, and in the end a relationship with God has to be the ultimate relationship. God has a very comforting message for us: *'Don't be afraid, for I am with you. Don't be discouraged, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will hold you up with my victorious right hand.'* Isaiah 41:10. They would have to be the most heartening and reassuring

words you could possibly find in the Bible. That's what you get with a relationship with God, and it is Christ who shows us the way to that relationship; who makes it possible for us to relate to God.

There is the story of a wealthy man and his son who loved to collect rare works of art. They had everything in their collection, from Picasso to Raphael. They would often sit together and admire the great works of art. When the Vietnam conflict broke out, the son went to war. He was very courageous and died in battle while rescuing another soldier. The father was notified and grieved deeply for his son.

About a month later, just before Christmas, there was a knock on the door. A young man stood there with a large package in his hands. He said, 'Sir, you don't know me, but I am the soldier for whom your son gave his life. He was carrying me to safety when he was struck by a bullet and he died instantly. He often talked about you and your love for art.' The young man held out his package. 'I know this isn't much. I'm not really a great artist, but I think your son would have wanted you to have this.'

The father opened the package. It was a portrait of his son, painted by the young man. He stared in awe at the way the soldier had captured the personality of his son in the painting. His eyes welled up in tears. He thanked the young man and offered to pay him for the picture. 'Oh no, sir. I could never repay what your son did for me. It's a gift.'

The father hung the picture over his mantelpiece. Every time visitors came to his home he took them to see the portrait of his son before he showed them any of his other great works he had collected.

The father died a few months later. There was to be a great auction of his paintings. Many influential people gathered, excited about the opportunity to purchase one for their collection. On the stage sat the painting of his son. The auctioneer pounded his gavel, 'We will start the bidding with this picture of the son. Who will bid for this picture?'

There was silence. Then a voice from the back of the room called out, 'We want to see the famous paintings. Please move on.' But the auctioneer persisted, 'Will someone bid for this painting? \$200? \$100?' 'Someone else called out, 'We didn't come to see this painting. Let's get on with the real bids.' But still the auctioneer continued, 'The son! Who will take the son?'

Finally, a voice came from the back of the room. It was the longtime gardener of the man and his son. 'I'll give \$20 for the painting.' Being a poor man, it was all he could afford. The auctioneer called out, 'Any other bids? Going once, going twice. Sold for \$20.'

A man sitting quite near the front said loudly, 'Now let's get on with the collection!' The auctioneer laid down his gavel. 'I'm sorry, the auction is over.' Cries of 'What about the paintings?' were heard.

'I'm sorry,' said the auctioneer, 'but when I was called to conduct this auction, I was told of a secret stipulation in the will. Only the painting of the son would be auctioned. Whoever bought that painting would inherit the entire estate, including the paintings. The man who took the son gets everything!'

Much like the auctioneer, God's message today is, 'The Son, the Son, who'll take the Son?' Because you see, whoever takes the Son, gets everything.