

## SERMON 4B 2018

Ask someone on the street to quote a Bible verse, any Bible verse, and you may get a blank stare.

But ask them to *name* a Bible verse and you are in business: John 3:16. It's the perfect verse to plaster on a bumper, or brandish on a sign at a sports game. John 3:16 has become a kind of trademark for certain Christians -- a way to reduce and simplify one version of the Christian gospel to a quick sound bite.

However is it so simple? As we discover from John's Gospel, the message isn't always so simplistic or easy to understand. For example the passage today is a part of a wider dialogue. Only a few verses earlier, Jesus is in conversation with Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader. And in this dialogue he is offering to Nicodemus a kind of

summary of God's good purposes for the world. Jesus is trying to get Nicodemus to look at the bigger picture, however as we know, he leaves confused with more questions than answers.

So despite this passages slogan nature we come to a realisation that the message is far from simple; in fact the context suggests that the truth about God's purposes in Christ is confusing and troubling. Perhaps this is because we know that nothing in life is so simple. We live in an often confusing and troubled world, where easy answers are not always available.

We just have to look at what is going on in our world to realise that. Take for example the violence we have seen in recent months from the troubled places in our world. How could one human do such things to another human? It all seems so horribly evil. Not

only is what people do to each other beyond our comprehension but also beyond our understanding is how we can do anything about it. We all know that violence breeds violence. We don't want to act in the same way they do. But is doing nothing enough? Our government has had to wrestle with these thoughts just as we do. How we overcome evil is a very complicated question. It is complicated morally, politically and theologically. There is no easy answer and what seems right for one person will seem wrong for another.

2

I suppose looking at our own past may help us to understand something of what is going on. To realise that it isn't all so clear

cut. It is not all that long ago that we in the western world were doing similar things. People were hung drawn and quartered in public. People had their heads chopped off in public. People were burnt at the stake in public. All this was done in the name of God because we were trying to reform the church. Our own history is not free from evil either.

I wonder what it was that helped us to overcome such barbaric treatment of each other. There is no definite point I can find that people said we won't do this anymore. I like to believe it was the result of people becoming so disgusted with what they saw that this began a change of heart. Over time the change was made and we have become what we like to believe is civilized. Unfortunately there are still things in our society which suggest we haven't really

made it yet. We know the message, but we still have not understood.

3

Maybe in the current situation their own people will become so disgusted with this treatment of human beings that they will themselves bring about a change of behaviour. There is no quick fix but we must keep working for solutions to overcome all evil in our world. I hope that the solutions will be diplomatic, political, economic, and religious. Dialogue is what is needed. Unfortunately some will never dialogue and this is where force appears to be the only way forward.

What can we Christian people do? Is there any action we can take? Why should we

bother responding to such things anyway? Aren't the someone else's problem?

God so loved the *world* that he gave his only Son.

God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Light has come into the world.

4

Notice the number of times this text refers to the world.

I think this is why we need to be involved with the world because it is God's world and it is still God's concern. God's love is certainly personal but it is much bigger than that. It has a broadness which extends to those we may not love. How on earth are we

to love the world in the same way God does?

Loving some people near to us in life is hard enough. How can we love the world in all its diversity and complexity. There are many people for whom we clearly have little time. The world is far too big for us to contemplate. And yet, and yet... That is what we are asked to do. But it seems not only impossible but also *painful*. Yes it is and it is out of the pain that healing comes. It is out of death that resurrection comes. Hard lessons for us to learn.

And it was in fact this same hard lesson that Nicodemus found so difficult to confront. He in a sense finds the Good News slogan of John 3:15 so confusing because it demands that he let go of all that he has accomplished and understood -- let go and become like a newborn, ready to receive the world on completely new terms. There is an

ethical dimension to this understanding. Some things are hard to grasp not because they are theoretically complex, but because they ask so much of us. We don't want to understand, because if we understand, we are implicated.

God loved the world so much that God gave the Son so that we may believe and have eternal life (John 3:16). What is it about this "simple" Good News that *we* don't want to understand?

Well in the first place, we must contend with the peculiar and troubling image Jesus has chosen to describe himself: he says that he is like the serpent that Moses lifted up in the wilderness from our reading in Numbers. It is a difficult image and a difficult story.

Why on earth were the Hebrew people told to make a graven image when their laws forbade idols and images? When the people complain about Moses and God, why does God send poisonous serpents only to use one for healing? There I think is the answer. Paradoxically, that which brings death also brings life. The story as we have it has some unanswerable questions, and quite frankly is rather hard to stomach.

But its basic message is thankfully redeemed by the New Testament. John tells us that like the Hebrews looked to the bronze serpent for healing, so we are to look at the death and resurrection of Jesus for our healing. In Jesus we see again that strange conjunction of death bringing life. So if Jesus, both dead and alive, is lifted up, then this will bring healing and get rid of the evil of life. Here is why the Cross, both

the Cross with the body of Jesus and the plain Cross of the resurrection, are such potent symbols of the Christian faith. It is from this dying and rising that our true life comes.

6

Here we see what it means to love the world. These are the lengths God goes to that the world might be saved. Clearly the present state of the world tells us that the cross of Jesus still has to be lifted up for the world.

So how are we to lift up the cross now? The first thing we have to do is pray. Yes I know that is too simplistic and we don't get the answers we want. But prayer is not always a matter of getting answers. Prayer is about us looking to Jesus lifted up who will draw all people to himself. We look to him so that

we are reminded of the work he has already done to save the world. This is where we obtain our hope. The world is God's and when we pray we are reminded of that. When we pray we are aligning ourselves with God and our desire for his realm to be seen on earth. When we pray we are looking to the risen Christ who is our hope.

7

Not only are we to look to Jesus, lifted up, but we are to be that same Jesus now, lifted up, showing the love of God for the world where ever we are. The world in this case doesn't only mean people overseas. The world usually means those who are different from me. Those I don't really relate to. So the world is those people I meet daily who need to have the love of God shown to them. Not only is God's love

broad, in that it is not just a personal gift to me but is for those I consider different. God's love goes to extremes. That is what the crucifixion is about.

God is prepared to suffer and die to show us what real love is about. In that suffering we are shown that the pains of life are taken seriously by God. All our suffering is taken up into God's suffering for humanity. But from that suffering we are shown that God's love transforms our lives to bring new life. Receive a new life in ways we often hadn't thought of. That's the sort of love we are to hold up for others to see.

8

We are like the serpent held up in the desert. We are like Jesus held up on the

cross. So we are invited to hold up the love of God in our words and actions.

And one such action is coming here to this place week by week to see the body of Christ held up before us in bread and wine. A mysterious action, almost unexplainable, yet so simple. For bread and wine are such simple objects, yet have a complex meaning for those of us who seek to be nourished by Christ.

And so in this action today, we receive that love which God shows us in the person of Jesus. The love which inspires us to be the risen Christ lifted up for all to see, so that the world might know God's love, a simple slogan, yet a complicated truth.