

Sermon for Romsey and Lancefield Uniting Churches

22nd of March, 2009

John 3:14-21

Ephesians 2:1-10

On Wednesday this week I was at a meeting with a couple of retired ministers and a handful of ministers in placement. I confessed that I hadn't written today's sermon yet, and, assuming that they all had multiple sermons on today's readings, suggested, **as a joke**, that I could steal one of theirs. Rod Horsfield asked me how I could be having trouble writing a sermon on one of the most well-known and fundamental verses in the entire Bible, John 3:16: '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.' I said that my trouble was that whenever I hear this verse I start wondering and worrying about what 'believing' means in this context. Rod said the trouble was that so many people try to turn 'believing' into a work, something that we have to *do* in order to earn God's love.

That was an epiphany for me, because that's been my problem. I hear or read John 3:16 and wonder whether I am 'believing' in the right way; whether my belief is good enough to ensure that rather than perishing I acquire eternal life. And that's absolutely the wrong way to read this verse, or indeed this entire story. This isn't about us believing so well or living such good lives that we earn our own salvation. This is about God's love, love so extraordinary, overwhelming, inclusive, that through it the world, that objectively probably deserves condemnation, is saved.

This love is given to us unconditionally. We do not do anything to earn it. Jesus does not say: Because people so believed in me God in His love sent me to save them. It is the other way round. God's love comes first. As Jesus tells those surrounding him: 'God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.' The *whole* world is to be saved, not just small parts of it. And through **God's** love, not because of its merit. As the epistle reminds us in words that are at the core of our identity as a Reformed church: 'For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast.' We have nothing of which to boast. But we do have a lot for which to be grateful.

What does this mean about the rest of today's gospel reading, with the reference to condemnation and judgment? If the world is saved through God's love and not our own works, then how can anyone be condemned? What is the judgment? Jesus explains: 'And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.' The light comes into the world and illuminates our lives. That is the judgment, that our deeds are revealed in the light.

I did not grow up being told that God was watching me. I think I was the wrong generation for that, and I definitely went to the wrong church. I never had the sense that God was keeping an eye on me and tallying up everything I did wrong, that some people I know were brought up with. That God always seemed, as I understood Him, to be particularly concerned with people dancing and doing things on Sunday – although that might just be me watching too many American movies. But in a sense this is what is happening. Everything we do is seen in the light that the life of Jesus shines on the world. That's the judgment. Given Jesus' example of how to live a life in relationship with God, how is our life measuring up? Jesus' coming into the world shows us what a godly life is like; the true Light, which enlightens everyone, has come.

If I look at my life in the light of Jesus' life, what do my deeds look like? Not brilliant. Do I give the needs of others priority over my own wants? Not really, although Lent Event is encouraging me to do that. Do I treat other people with the respect, dignity, acceptance and love that Jesus treated those around him? Frequently, no. Do I follow the example of the servant Jesus who washed his disciples' feet? Very, *very* occasionally.

In Matthew's gospel the story of the judgment of the nations tells us that judgment will come at the end time, when the Son of Man comes in his glory.¹ In John's gospel, judgment happens here and now, as the light shines in the darkness. This story encourages us to do deeds that can be seen in the light as deeds that have been done in God.

Remember that God's love comes first. We are not to do these deeds to *earn* God's love; that love is a given. Today's epistle says: '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 - and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness towards us in Christ Jesus.' Eternal life is not earned; it is a gift of love.

That love enables us to grow, to become more and more the people that God made us to be, created in Christ Jesus for good works. Today's gospel reading is part of the conversation Jesus had with the Pharisee Nicodemus, who came to visit Jesus first in the dark of night. Later, Nicodemus argued for Jesus to get a fair hearing, and was accused of also coming from Galilee.² Finally he assisted Joseph of Arimathea in Jesus' burial, when he brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds.³ Nicodemus, whose first encounter with Jesus was in darkness, ends up serving him in the light, so it may be clearly seen that his deeds were done in God. There is hope for us all! Amen..

¹ Matthew 25:31-46.

² John 7:51-2.

³ John 19:39.