

THE ANTIDOTE TO ALL DISCRIMINATION

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 15 March 2015, by The Revd Dr Keith Garner. Dr Garner is Superintendent and CEO of Wesley Central Mission, Sydney. Readings were Numbers 21:4-9, Ephesians 2:1-10 and St John 3:14-21.

Our lectionary leads us to the third chapter of John and we recognise that we are exploring one of the best loved sections of all the gospels. Prof. A M Hunter pointed out that "John's overriding concern is to draw out the deepest meaning of what Christ's coming means to people." We keep that in mind as we turn to the text before us.

It is also worth noting that this is one of those New Testament passages with a vital connection to the Old Testament. Verse 14 refers to Moses lifting up a bronze snake in the desert and the story of the fiery serpents in Numbers 21:4-9 has a clear link to this gospel passage.

As the bronze serpent was lifted up, it served as an antidote for the deadly bite of poisonous serpents. As Jesus Christ is lifted up on a cross, all are able to look to him in faith and find eternal life.

It is important to note that in John's Gospel the writer moves almost imperceptibly from recording the words of Jesus to reflecting upon them. It is difficult to be precise about where speech ends and where the gospel writer's thoughts begin. One writer commented on the link between verses 15 and 16: "So we may presume that John starts to ruminate in verse 16."

Text: John 3:16 –

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

The concept of discrimination is one that we well understand in our society today. It is linked to powerful words such as prejudice and racism, which are fundamentally at odds with the Christian faith. Karl Barth reflected that the demand for freedom from discrimination is one of the most important tenets of the Christian faith. History has seen the dreadful consequences of discrimination which has brought nations to war, generated apartheid and, in our own country, left scars that are not too difficult to perceive even today.

It is hard for us to fully grasp the impact of the words of Jesus in what Luther called 'The gospel within the gospels'. In fact, for many people our text sums up the Christian faith and delineates the meaning of God's love. One writer said of our text that it "stood out like a neon-sign on a dark road". This love is not loose and disconnected; it has a focus – and that is love for all the world.

Before we open up our text, it is important to recognise that the focus of the love of God is 'the world' and we are not talking in terms of a cosmic location, but something that embraces all of life as we know it and quite specifically the human race. People are the object of God's care and we need to recognise this extravagant embrace of love which God has made clear in Jesus Christ.

Lent is a good time to consider this text for in John's Gospel the cross becomes Christ's throne and reveals his glory and power. For John, being lifted up on the cross is the equivalent of being lifted up on a throne. John makes a good point, for in the cross we see the surpassing greatness and majesty of God. The words 'so loved' remind us that God's love is put into action in the specific circumstances of human experience.

Many of us have been repulsed by the stories that surround the execution of two young Australians on an island off mainland Indonesia. We do not need to remind ourselves that the death penalty is still enshrined in the laws of the majority of nations across the world – and practised by some of our greatest economic partners. Let us be clear that this is not a new issue, but our voice needs to be heard whenever this matter is discussed – whether it concerns Australia directly or not.

One writer pointed out that the tense used in the original shows God's practical and demonstrable love – "...reaching back to eternity and coming to fruition in Bethlehem and at Calvary, is viewed as one, great, central fact. That love was rich and true, full of understanding, tenderness and majesty."

THIS LOVE IS AVAILABLE TO ALL ... FOR HE GAVE

The love of God as we meet it in the New Testament can be understood to be 'a gift'. We only have to look back to the Prologue of John to discern this (John 1:12-13).

Our whole understanding of salvation is closely related to how we respond to this truth. It is much more than good feelings – and the implications of this love becomes the mission of the Christian community.

C S Lewis picked up this theme when he wrote, "A world of nice people, content in their own niceness, looking no further, turned away from God, would be just as desperately in need of salvation as a miserable world – and might even be more difficult to save."

There is an essential longing at the heart of life. We enjoy going to the cinema and people sometimes say they want to see a film that has a beginning, a middle and an end. With his links to *Star Wars*, George Lucas knew that making films was far more complex than that. However, his early advice to Steven Spielberg was: "If the man and woman walk off into the sunset hand-in-hand in the last reel, it adds ten million dollars to the box office." This could be said to be because there is a deep desire within human life to see the brokenness of this world ended.

God has indiscriminately poured out his love and made it available to all, irrespective of who people are – or what their social standing might be.

In his commentary, Bruce Milne makes much of the fact that this verse speaks of the "all-inclusive scope of God's love". We put that into the context of those hearing the words for the first time.

- The first readers would have been familiar with the notion of God's special love for Israel.
- The early Christian community would be well-acquainted with the thought that God had called them to a special and distinctive mission to the world.

This love which God gave to us in Christ challenges all our narrowness and calls us to a perception that is far greater and more inclusive than we could ever imagine.

George MacDonald concluded, "The love of our neighbour is the only door out of the dungeon of self."

Frank Clark, the US politician, reflected, "If you have an unpleasant neighbour, the odds are that he does too."

In his notable commentary, F F Bruce offers some thoughts on John 3:16, "If there is one sentence more than any other which sums up the fourth gospel it is this. The love of God is limitless; it embraces all humanity. No sacrifice was too great to bring its unmeasured intensity home to women and men: the best that God had to give, he gave – his only Son, his well-beloved. Nor was it for one nation or group that he was given: he was given so that all, without distinction or exception, who put their faith on him might be rescued from destruction, and blessed with a life that is life indeed."

THIS LOVE BECOMES AN INVITATION ... WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM

The idea of God's love as an invitation has already been introduced in John 1:12 and it suggests that this love is not automatic; it requires recipients and on our part a desire to receive as we believe.

There are some Christians who struggle with this concept, but in my opinion it is fundamental to all that we are as a Christian community.

For John, believing and receiving are closely related – and there are a number of things about receiving that are worth reflecting upon and then considering how they can be applied in our day-to-day living:

- Receiving is often more difficult than giving

- Receiving requires on our part an opening up of heart and life to the fullness of God
- There is a fearful closeness between receiving and rejecting
- Receiving is as much a gift as the gift itself, when we see that receiving is only made possible because of the generous gift of grace made real through the Spirit of God.

This gift of God gives us insight into God's eternal purpose. We see this in verse 17 – *“For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”*

Many of the Jews of the day believed that the day of the Lord was going to mean punishment for many and this in itself created an exclusivism, which has been embraced by Christians just as powerfully.

In terms of discrimination, Christians may state glibly that they love the whole world but, as Calvin Miller wrote, they “permit themselves animosities within their immediate world ... but loving the world at large can only be done by loving face-to-face the world that is not so distant.”

The essence of God's love is made unmistakably plain in these words and such language must be spelled out in word and deed across all cultures, races and at all times. This cuts across all unhealthy and discriminate actions. The most powerful and practical instrument in this communication of the love of God is through human personality so transformed and demonstrable to all who observe.

THIS LOVE DRAWS US INTO A NEW LIFE ... BECAUSE WE HAVE ETERNAL LIFE

As this gift is received into our lives, we enter into one of the great truths which John's Gospel offers to the world – that eternal life is not something beyond this world, but something that has already been activated in Christ. It could be said that to believe is to have eternal life.

“Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life.” (John 5:42)

Frequently, when people think of the gospel, whether preached or shared with others, it is considered to be in relation to an intellectual response that has to be made – when, in point of fact, it is not so much a decision to be made, but a gift to be received. There is no doubt at all that there are three essential components – that is knowledge, belief and trust. The three are always present, but there is a danger in seeing knowledge as most important.

This gift, once received, is life-transforming and has the power to break any kind of discrimination simply because it is a love for everyone – and the colour of a person's skin, accent or tone of voice – or whatever other distinction we might make – becomes null and void.

Radical groups like the Aryan nation dare to assert that God only loves white people, preferably Nordic types. There are black Muslims that assert that only black people are the apple of God's eye. Throughout history, various Christian groups have had the audacity to claim that God only listens to people who belong to their group. Broadcasting the all-embracing reach of God is the very substance of the mission of the church in each and every age.

We have never needed the antidote to discrimination more than today.

On an overseas flight from Johannesburg many years ago, a middle-aged white woman found herself sitting next to a black man. She called the flight attendant over to complain. “What seems to be the problem, Madam?” asked the attendant. “Can't you see?” she said. “You have put me next to this black man. Find me another seat!” The steward tried to calm down the infuriated passenger. “The flight is very full today, but I'll check to see if we have any seats available.”

A few minutes later, the steward returned with information, which she delivered to the woman, who was staring at the people around her with an arrogant grin. “Madam, unfortunately, as I suspected, economy is full. However, we do have one seat in first class,” the steward continued. “It is most extraordinary to make this kind of upgrade. However, I have special permission of the captain. Given the circumstances, the captain felt it was outrageous that someone should be forced to sit next to such an obnoxious person.” The attendant then turned

to the black man and said, "Sir, if you would like to get your things, a seat is ready for you in first class."

At this point the surrounding passengers rose and gave a standing ovation, as the black man walked up to first class.

It is all too easy to see this challenge in terms of race and colour alone, but the message which we must receive from John 3:16 has an application to all of life and for those who are confronted by the urgency of the moment.

In these chaotic, turbulent and at times totally unpredictable days, there are powerful forces at work that would ignore and even discard the great legacy of faith which is handed on to us all. The best way to stand up to this prevailing secularism is to throw a bridge over the gulf of separation and give this text clothes in which to dress, attitudes which must be expressed and a witness which cannot reasonably be ignored. This will be the antidote to all discrimination.