

Homily for Lent 4, 2021

John 3:14-21

'The love of God in his Son'

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TEXT

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

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.*

¹⁷ *'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. ¹⁸Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.*

¹⁹ *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. ²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.'*

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INTRODUCTION

I'd like to speak to you today from our text about the ***love of God***.

It seems to me love is an overused word in our day,
And is often quite vague.

When we can say that we love our spouse,
Our children,
Our football team,
Chocolate,

And a new pair of shoes,

It's hard to know what love really means.

Similarly with the love of God,

Modern people can throw it around so casually because it seems like a feel-good doctrine everyone can get on board with,

That it gets watered down and made to be nearly meaningless.

We find something different when we turn to our text.

We find that the love of God described there is something robust and strong,

Something concrete and specific,

Something which is not mainly a feeling, but it about action.

So let's unpack this love of God in our text in three steps today,

First to see how God's love,

brings life from death (v 14-16)

brings freedom from condemnation (v 17-18)

brings light in our darkness (v 19 -21).

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GOD'S LOVE BRINGS LIFE FROM DEATH, v 14-16

So firstly in verses 14-16,

The love of God brings *life from death*.

The background to the famous John 3:16 is our Old Testament reading for today.

The account of the people of Israel in the wilderness complaining against the Lord,

God's punishment coming on them in the form of poisonous snakes which bite people who then die,

The people's repentance and request for Moses to intercede for them,

And God's means of salvation in a bronze snake put up on a pole,

Where anyone who looks at the snake will live.

This is a fairly wild story to say the least!

But it is the immediate context for the famous John 3:16,

It's that event that you are to have in your imagination as you hear John 3:16,

*Because 'just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness,
So must the Son of Man be lifted up,
That whoever believes in him may have eternal life.'*

Now how exactly is this connection supposed to work?

Well, in the Old Testament,

God commands Moses to make an image of the very thing which had been sent as a punishment on their sins,

The serpent.

So that the thing which was a symbol of their sin,
Became that which they were to look to in order to be saved.

In the same way,

We look to the Son of man, Christ Jesus,
Lifted up on the cross,

And we see first something which also points to our sin,
As well as our salvation.

Jesus did not go to the cross merely to show us God's love,
That's true,
But more needs to be said.

As one old preacher said,
I would not be proving my love for someone by merely running down a jetty and
jumping off and drowning.

No the love of God in the cross is much more specific,
It's about addressing the problem of sin.

The love of God compels Jesus to go to the cross,
For your sins.

he comes to bear the punishment for our sins,
And in taking that on himself,
Brings the gift of eternal life for all those who trust in him.

Make sure you catch too the move here to ***eternal*** life.

The OT event which points to Christ was mainly about physical, earthly death,
And being restored to physical, earth life.

But everyone of those people in wilderness who were healed by looking in faith
to the serpent on the pole,
Would one day die again.

Whereas we look to Christ Jesus lifted up to receive the gift of eternal life,
A new type of life which is infinitely grater both in quality and in quantity,

The life of God,

That's what God's love offers you.

*'For God so loved the world,
That he gave his only Son,
So that everyone who believes in him,
May not perish but have eternal life'.*

There's the love of God,
And it's for you,

The love which brings life from our death.

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GOD'S LOVE BRINGS FREEDOM FROM CONDEMNATION, v 17-18

Secondly then,
We see that God's love brings ***freedom from condemnation.***

Take note of these changes ways of speaking through these famous verses,

We've been very much in the realm of life and death imagery and language,

But now we're moving into the realm of judgment and condemnation,
The other side of which is acquittal, innocence, and freedom as well.

*'God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world,
But in order that the world might be saved through him.*

This is a negative way using different words of saying what we heard in the previous verse,

The motivation of God,
His heart for this world,
Is love,

Or to put it another way,

The motivation of God and his heart for this world is not to condemn it,

Not to write it off,

Not to cast it aside onto the rubbish heap,

But to save it,

To rescue it,

To redeem it.

This is so important because in our fallen state,

We naturally think God is out to get us,

Because of our bad consciences,

Because of the sufferings of this life,

Even when people don't believe in God at all,

They still often feel as if there's something out there that has it in for them,

The universe is out to get me.

This is not to mention that our lives before other people too often feel as if it's one big trial,

Where the audience is just waiting for us to fail,

So they can judge and condemn us.

Maybe you feel like this at times?

We need to hear these words inspired by the Holy Spirit,

'God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world...'

God is not on a mission to judge and condemn you,

Yes, left on your own you are guilty,

But in Christ God comes to declare you innocent,
to save you,
To acquit you,
to free you from condemnation.

So then,
why does not everyone receive this gift?

Again it comes down to faith in Christ.

*'Those who believe in him are not condemned,
But those who do not believe are condemned already,
Because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God'.*

And here we have another new theme introduced,
Which is that of significance of the present time in all this.

That little word 'already'.

What's being said here is that in the coming of the Son of God into the world,

The future of judge,
Has come into the present,

and so there's a sense in which the future judgment,
has come into the present.

And because Christ Jesus is also the saviour,
This also means the future gift of salvation has already come into the present as well.

Now this Gospel does still speak of future judgment,
You can read about that in chapter 5 if you like,

But because Jesus has come and life and death,
Condemnation and freedom from it,

All depends on one's relation to Jesus,

Then the crucial time is not one off in the future,
But now in the present.

How often don't we human beings think that,

Sure maybe there's something to Christ and the Christian faith,

But I'll get to that later.

This text would have us consider it today, right now.

God loves you,
He sent his Son to die for you,
He came not to condemn you,

He calls you to trust in Christ, TODAY,

And receive the gift of eternal life in him which begins even now.

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GOD'S LOVE SHINES LIGHT IN OUR DARKNESS, v 19 -21

So, God's love brings *life* from death,
It brings *freedom* from condemnation,

And finally, it brings *light* into our darkness,

Although, the surprise is,
We don't always *want* that.

*'This is the judgment,
That the light has come into the world,
And people loved darkness rather than light,
Because their deeds are evil.'*

The question is,
What's going on in the human heart,
When we refuse God's offer of rescue from the predicament we're in?

Well,
The way it's described first is that people actually *'love the darkness rather than the light,
Because their deeds are evil.'*

It's a very strong way of putting it,
It's exactly the same word of verse 16,
God so **loved** the world,
We so love the spiritual darkness.

Here's a window into the true depth of the wickedness of the natural human heart.

Human beings aren't born in neutral spiritual territory,
We aren't unwillingly in the darkness,

We love the darkness,
We want to be apart from God in some perverse sense.

But why?

Well,

The text goes on...

'For all those do evil hate the light and do not come to the light,

So that their deeds may not be exposed.

I was speaking to a guy the other day who works in security on the night shift,

Often keeping an eye on businesses, shopping centres,
Those sorts of places that can be a target of crime during the night.

And as he spoke about how he did his work I realised that his most important
tool is not a gun,
Or a baton,

But a torch.

A light.

Because most of those up to mischief flee when you simply shine a light nearby.

That's the image being used here for one of the spiritual dynamics that prevents
us naturally from coming to Christ Jesus the light,

We love the spiritual darkness,
Because we can hide there in our secret sins.

Deep down we know that coming to Christ the light,
Means being completely and utterly exposed,

Every thought,
Every word,
Every deed,

Laid bare before almighty God,

That is no small thing.

It's worth knowing this spiritual insight when we see people struggling to
embrace the Christian faith.

on the surface there are intellectual reasons they struggle to believe,

Whereas underneath there can be deeper moral issues at work,

people don't want to have to give up this particular lifestyle or that particular habit.

But it's the case with us too as Christians.

You know if you fall back into some sin you struggle with,

You might avoid worship,

Avoid prayer,

Staying away from the light.

But thanks be to God,

That the Spirit of God has worked repentance in your heart to move you toward the light,

So that you can find that the light which exposes,

Is also the light which brings healing and life.

This is what the very last verse is about.

...those who do what is true come to the light,

So that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God'.

This verse can be a little hard to interpret,

But I take it in connection with a similar verse in 1 John 1,

There too language is used of darkness and light and doing what is true,

And we read,

⁸If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

So what's the difference ultimately between these two groups that run right through out text?

It's not so much between good people who naturally love God and do the truth,

And sinful people who naturally hate God and do evil,

No,

We're all part of this world naturally turned against God,

But here at the end of our text,

The basic difference is between those who admit that,

And those who don't.

Those who want to hide their sin,

To remain in the darkness,

And those who confess their sins,

bring it all out into the light.

And again,

even that,

is only ever a gift and work of God,

so that no one may boast.

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CONCLUSION

Dear friends in Christ,

let us embrace the fullness of the love of God in Christ Jesus.

It's a love which,

brings you life from death,

brings you freedom from condemnation,

brings light in your darkness.

God grant it for Jesus' sake. Amen.