

In a nutshell

12 3 17

Almighty God,
you show to those in error the light of your truth
that they may return to the way of righteousness:
grant to all who are admitted
 into the fellowship of Christ's religion,
that they may reject those things
 that are contrary to their profession
and follow all such things that are agreeable to the same.

Our text this morning is John 3, verse 16:

‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son
that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.’

When you were young, did you learn poetry off by heart ? When you were young, did you learn verses from the Bible off by heart ? And if you did, I'm guessing that one of the ones you would have committed to memory would be John 3 v16 which is our text today:

‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son
that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.’

Why is John 3 v16 so good a verse to know off by heart ? Simply because, in a nutshell, it expresses the heart of the gospel, the essence of the good news. And

the message is simple but wonderful: God, our Father, loves us, his children, every one of us, all of us. And how do we know? Because God has sent his only Son, Jesus, into the world to die for the world that the world might be saved through him, made fit for purpose for him. Through our belief in God, through belief in his Son, Jesus, we can be made into the people God truly intends us to be.

Well, if I stop now, and I could, that would be the shortest sermon I've ever preached but it would be sufficient in the sense that we have heard here the heart of our faith: that God loves us and that, through belief in his Son, Jesus, we can be saved.

But I guess you have the stamina to hear more and Father Peter would be disappointed if I preach for less than five minutes so let me just draw your attention to three things: Nicodemus; being born again; and the wind.

Nicodemus embodies a story that John doesn't tell us in his gospel. We know for a fact that Nicodemus is a Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin, and that he's well off. We know for a fact he respects Jesus and that he wants to talk to him and is prepared to come to him by night. And we know that, with Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus provided the wherewithal for Jesus' burial – in his case, according to John 19 v38, a large quantity of myrrh and aloes to anoint Jesus' corpse. But what we don't hear is how someone like Nicodemus actually came to faith, how he overcame his doubt, his literal-mindedness, to understand just how belief in Jesus could be a new beginning and the Spirit of God could blow through his life.

Being born again is one of the wonderful images of what it means to be a Christian. In essence, like the birth of a baby, the picture of being born again encapsulates the idea of starting life afresh. Being born again is a great way of saying that as Christians we have a new start as new people, renewed, washed clean, with hearts open to mirror the love that God shows us, that we feel for him, the love we demonstrate by how we love our neighbours because we value ourselves. Life is worth living because, in God's eyes, we have true, real worth.

And thirdly the wind. In Greek, πνευμα (pneuma), and in Hebrew, ruach, both have the double meaning of wind and spirit; and here Jesus is using the image of the wind to impart a truth about the mystery of the Spirit of God. We can't literally see the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, but just like the wind when it blows, we can see the effect of his presence in people's lives.

So, let me leave you, this morning, with this encouraging thought: that God loves you and he wants you to be renewed; to be inspired, informed, and enthused by his Spirit; and through belief in his Son, to be his children.

I have spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Michael and All Angels, Great Torrington;

St Giles, Little Torrington

12th March 2017

