

Matins

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Epiphany

Jonah 3.1-5, 10; John 3.16-21

One of the delights of being canon in residence between Boxing Day and New Year's day was being able to read the entire book of Jonah at Morning Prayer in the Latin chapel. While friends and relations came and went from my home and sensible people were enjoying some late mornings the faithful few gathered at 7.20 to hear the saga of the most reluctant of all missionaries, whose brief story could be summarised even briefly as: sent, swallowed, sicked up and sulking.

And that's all I propose to say about Jonah until the end. This sermon is principally about the reading from John, and in particular the famous verse, Chapter 3. Verse 16: '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'. This verse is probably the best-known verse in the New Testament and is often quoted as though it stood alone, an encapsulation of the entire Gospel.

The appeal is that it so all embracing. God so loved, that he gave his only Son. An echo of Genesis 22, where God calls Abraham to take his only Son and sacrifice him on Mt Moriah. Where Isaac was spared, the Son of God was given. But note what the verse does not say. God so loved the world, but it is not the world that responds. The world, though loved by God, has a particular meaning in John's Gospel. The world stands for reality that is opposed to God, for all that ignores, neglects and hates God. It is creation gone wrong. That is the world to which God sent his Son, the world God loves so much. But though a later verse tells us that the Son was sent in order that the world might be saved through him, there is no expectation of a universal response to the universal gift. Indeed, if everyone who believes in him is not to perish, what will be the fate of those who do not believe?

The verse comes out of the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus, that night time conversation in which Jesus speaks to Nicodemus of being born again of water and Spirit, and of the Son of Man being lifted up so that

whoever believes in him might have eternal life. The lifting up of the Son of Man points to the cross, the source of salvation. So when we hear the words 'he gave his only Son' we know that this means he gave him to the cross. It is not only an echo but an answer to Genesis 22, the sacrifice of Isaac. But how do we deal with the paradox of universal love, and, apparently, limited salvation? If we are asking that question we are opening up a paradox which runs through the whole of John's Gospel.

On the one hand no Gospel is so universal in its scope. 'All things were made by him and without him was not anything made that was made, In him was life and his life was the light of men'. Clement of Alexandria in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century passed on a tradition he had himself received that John wrote his Gospel to supplement the other Gospels, to provide a 'spiritual Gospel'. That tradition has been passed down through the Church and affects to this day the way we tend to read John's Gospel. We somehow feel it is for everyone. The early Christian apologist Justin Martyr used John to develop a sophisticated Christian understanding of Greek culture which enabled them to see the work of the Logos, the pre-incarnate Word in the highest and best of Hellenistic philosophy. Nearer to our own time Bishop Brooke Foss Westcott was convinced that a Christian dialogue with Hinduism would take place through the Gospel of John, and I can report for myself for what it is worth that I once met a humble telephone operator in Delhi who read John's Gospel before she went to bed at night, though she was actually a devotee of the curly headed miracle worker Satya Sai Baba who died recently. For him the truths she received through the guru and the truths of the Christian text she loved were one and the same. And there are countless other examples of the universality of John's Gospel. It is *recognised* as having a very particular voice and appeal that goes beyond the boundaries of the Christian world.

But the serene and majestic Christ of John's Gospel both conceals and reveals a rather different theme; a religious dispute of great bitterness. John's Gospel is permeated with the brooding anticipation of rejection and persecution. Just as Jesus came to his own and his own received him not, so rejection awaited, and still awaits his disciples.

The conflict behind John's Gospel is believed by many contemporary scholars to have been between two groups of Jews living in the Asian diaspora, perhaps in Ephesus. One group had come to believe in the divinity of Jesus, another rejected this interpretation of him. The outlines of the argument can be seen in the Gospel projected back into the conversations that Jesus had with those who are always called in John 'The Jews'. Given that we these days realise that we understand Jesus better if we try to see him within the Judaism of his time, John's insistence in distancing Jesus from *all* Jews must be judged as anachronistic. Then we can see that there are always two contexts being referred to in John's Gospel: the context of Jesus's own time and the later context of those for whom John was writing, Christian Jews who were suffering for their belief in Christ's divinity. The price paid by this group was ultimate exclusion; they were rejected from the synagogue, losing their culture, their festivals, their distinctive identity. And this is why John's Gospel is so concerned with the status of Jesus himself. He want to show that Jesus in his own person replaced the vital channels of Jewish life. That's why he puts the cleansing of the temple at the start of the Gospel and quotes Jesus saying it will be destroyed and then rebuilt in three days. This is a reference to the resurrection, but the point is that Jesus's risen body recreates the temple. John also has Jesus claiming divine authority to preach at the Festival of Booths, the festival of the giving of the law. So Jesus becomes in John's Gospel both the temple and the law.

All through this Gospel those who believe in Jesus are compared with those who just don't get it, those who take his words literally and yet miss his meaning. So there is always the tension between invitation and judgment:

'Those who believe 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.'

This is where judgment lies, the separating out of the believers from the unbelievers, of light from dark, of salvation from condemnation. God may love the world but it is not the world that is saved.

When those who believed in the divinity of Jesus found themselves excluded from the majority, they did what harassed minorities always do and closed in on themselves, which had the effect reinforcing the division, and making it a matter not of accident or loyalty but of divine destiny. The contrast between flesh and spirit, darkness and light, the birth from a mother's womb and the birth from above then ceases to be a matter of personal choice, it carries almost cosmological significance. God so loved the world,...and yet the world resists, as it always did and it always AT the same time the very fact of being excluded, hated, persecuted, testifies to the authenticity of faith.

So the universalism of John has to be qualified by its opposite, a sectarian mentality which has run through Christian history and re-emerges again and again. It surfaced in early monasticism, when the desert hermits fled the world to find salvation in the desert; it emerged in prophetic and apocalyptic movements through the middle ages and finally broke out in force at the Reformation where the individualism of John produced a theological and social revolution against Catholicism. It's still around, not only as sectarianism, but the whiff off heresy. John's Gospel carries the memory, spelt out more fully in the epistles that bear John's name, that the divided community was once one in its recognition of Jesus Christ. But now there are true believers and false ones. There are those who enjoy a personal relationship of faith with Jesus Christ and those who do not.

John's Christian Jews, rejected by the synagogue, have to make a new identity if they are to survive. They were labelled heretics, and now they carry into Christian heresy the tendency to see heresy in the other; in Christians who are different from us. Remember this is the Gospel that has Jesus on the night of his betrayal praying so movingly for the oneness of the Church. Yet there is ample potential for the sectarian Christianity which feeds off the sense of its own specialness and exclusivity over and against other believers. It has always been too easy for groups of Christians to magnify disputes into fundamental divisions between Christ and the Anti-Christ. For believers who are too pure, heresy is everywhere. The world, even the institutional church is a very dangerous place. The only safe place is with those who share the correct doctrine. Which is why John's Gospel, if not balanced with the other Gospels can produce a

Christianity which is both egocentric and self-righteous. John's Gospel may be a spiritual Gospel but it can also be a dangerous one.

Certainly this is a legacy that we often find in those forms of Christianity which set apart John 3.16 as the Gospel in a nutshell. 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.' On the one hand those for whom this IS the Gospel are passionately driven to reach out in hope that the world will believe and be saved, this is the spur to mission. On the other hand the verse evokes anxiety about the adequacy of personal belief as a response to Christ. Do I really believe? Is my belief the right sort? Am I really saved. Or if not focused on the self it raises questions of others. Is he or, she, or are they, really Christians at all? A sobering subtext in this week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

But at this point I come back to Jonah. Jonah who was sent to Nineveh to preach repentance. The reluctant missionary who fled the face of God, and eventually found himself on his three day walk across the city only to find to his disgust that his gloom-laden preaching of repentance was all too successful and God had forgiven the heretical Ninevites in spite of their no-doubt appalling behaviour and doubtful doctrines. And I want to say to those who are oppressed by the implications of John 3.16, lighten up. If God can manage the Ninevites he can surely manage you.