

14th March 2021 – LENT 4 – Chris’s Sermon

John 3:14-21

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...

This is a very well-known passage of scripture (well-known and well loved). It talks about the love of God – poured out into the world.

In Jesus (in his life and death and resurrection) we’re shown a God who reaches out to us – to know us and be known by us - a God who blesses us freely and without limit - without condition or reservation.

This is our Gospel – “For God so loved the world...”

And, that’s what I want to talk about today – this divine love – a love that is hopeful and full of promise and engaging – a love that can and does influence our behaviour – and our priorities.

According to Luther, one of the great theologians of the reformation, this reading gives us a summary of the Gospel – a summary of everything that we could ever want to say about the Good News – Again, our reading talks about divine love – a love that comes to us in the face of Christ.

But, the reading also talks about how we respond to that love – it talks about the insights and the truths that we discover – the thoughts and actions that inspire us and shape our lives. Before we go any further, I think it’s important to remember that our experiences of God (the experiences that shape us) are deeply personal. And they will be different for each of us.

Michael Perham makes this very point, when he talks about our experience of the Eucharist. He reminds us that God comes to each of us in the Eucharist – it’s interactive, but also deeply personal. The Eucharist is a powerful example of the grace that we share with God, in moments of connection and blessing. It shows us the face of a loving God – a God of welcome and understanding – and we’re also given an opportunity to be overwhelmed by this welcome - a holiness beyond our understanding – an experience of God that picks us up, shakes us and puts us down again in another place. (This description of the Eucharist is taken straight from Perham – in his book “to Tell Afresh” - p.33)

So, the Eucharist is an extension of the incarnation – it embodies John 3:16

“...The God who became flesh and blood in Jesus his Son is the God who created matter, who hides in the material, is clothed in the physical and pours out his grace in the sacramental...” (p.33) Perham reminds us that the sacred is hidden in plain sight - hidden within the physical world (bread, wine, water, oil, physical touch) – and the words of John 3:16 call us to experience this sacramental truth for ourselves.

The Eucharist reveals the depth of God’s love for us “...for God so loved the world...”

And, in a way, the Eucharist calls the world into communion with God. Perham reminds us that care for the world is not dependent on our intercession (what we do or how we pray), but rather a shared perspective (what we share) – the Eucharist is an opportunity to join with God’s intention and longing.

Consider the words that we share in our thanksgiving prayer “...Renew us by your Holy Spirit, unite us in the body of your Son, and bring us with all your people into the joy of your eternal kingdom...” (APBA p. 129)

The Eucharist draws us in and then sends us out – we are sent out (transformed, nourished and equipped) to engage in our Christian mission.

The Eucharist is a feast for the hungry.

Yes, we're shown God's love in the broken bread and the wine poured out – we're shown this love in the passion of Christ. But, at the same time, we are reminded that this love is given special significance when it touches the most broken parts of our lives (when it becomes personal). We're reminded that this love (present in the broken bread and the wine poured out) is experienced fully by those who feel broken themselves or poured out in some way.

Extending this further, perhaps we could also say that the eucharist is experienced fully by those who feel connected to the suffering and brokenness of those around us. The words "Do this in remembrance of me" can then become a personal calling – a calling that gives life and hope to other people.

Again, we all view this grace from our own viewpoint – within our own context. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son..."

In other words, we're reminded that we participate in this divine love – through our thoughts and prayers, our actions and the ongoing prayer of our life's work – which binds us to God and each other.

If God so loved the world, then we are surely called to participate in that love, through prayer and service. In our worship, we begin with an act of remembrance – we share the story of Christ's passion, death and resurrection – in the broken bread and the wine poured out. We then allow the story to connect with our story – we ingest the story (literally) we take it in. The story becomes one with us, in our brokenness and in our calling.

At this point, we become one with the Holy Communion – it becomes food for us – it continues to feed us - as we leave the church and carry our faith forward into a new week.

Our Gospel today reminds us that we form beliefs in the presence of God – in harmony with God, which is the foundation of the love that we are called to share.

I think this is the point of our reading. Those who know Christ – those who have experienced the love of Christ in others, these people form beliefs and values that give life and hope to others.

So, ultimately, our gospel reading reminds us of the life that's possible when we share the love of Christ and the wisdom of God. Our reading talks about a vision of Christian community that's been passed down to us (a blessing that we share here every week, in the Eucharist – in the breaking of bread). We have been entrusted with beliefs and a hope that gives life to others. This is a message of grace that now needs to find a home in our broken and divided world.

In the days ahead (in this season of Lent) I hope we will have an opportunity to give thanks for the blessings in our lives – the beliefs that have been passed on to us. And, I pray that we will look for ways to share these blessings with others – so that others will be drawn into the love and grace of God that we share in Christ.

The Lord be with you.