

John 3:16 – 17 Good News – Oh how He loves us.

Let's begin with these two very well-known verses, full of both big words and small words. As you read slowly, which ones stand out?

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. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. NIV

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. 17 For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. KJV

16-18 "This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again. Anyone who trusts in him is acquitted; anyone who refuses to trust him has long since been under the death sentence without knowing it. And why? Because of that person's failure to believe in the one-of-a-kind Son of God when introduced to him. The Message.

These verses seem so pivotal and key. Like a fulcrum point. Rightly or wrongly I've started to measure other parts of the bible against them. So that's what I've been trying to do as I read, listen especially as we have been going through this series of Good News. It feels as this is the culmination of the Gospel the Good News. That God so loves the world, loves us, loves you and me, that he will sacrifice his only Son so that we will not perish but have eternal life.

I didn't get past the first few words I'm afraid so am going to focus on; The world – God - And Love, but with reference to the whole.



(Image of John of the Cross by Salvador Dali)

God so loved the world – what is the world? the natural world, is it humans, is it the geological world. Is it the worlds as we know it and understand it in our limited capacity both geographically and culturally? I understand it as everything that has been created because I believe that God created the world and everything in it and loves all that he has made, he loves it all. And he is love. Julian of Norwich, anchoress and writer in the Middle Ages credited with writing the first book by a known woman author wrote this “In this little thing I saw three truths. The first is that God made it. He second is that God loves it. The third is that God looks after it.” This little thing

is a small, created thing, like a hazelnut. Small insignificant yet God loves it. She goes on “What is he indeed that is maker and lover and keep? I cannot find words to tell.”

God's love is for the whole of creation. Praise God for the Chris Packham's, the Greta Tumberg's and David Attenborough's of this world who love our world so passionately and for their call to arms against its destruction.

So there is an understanding here of a God who is creator. God the Father the creator is the source of the love. A loving God, a God whose name and nature is love. And he has a son, Jesus, who shows us the way of the Father's love. At Christmas we celebrate Emmanuel – God with us. In sending the Son, we may see what God's love looks like in human form. So that we may know and understand his love and not perish. You can see I've not been to Theological college I'm not good at this bit. What I do know and have come to understand, have learnt, is that Jesus' love is radical, limitless, inclusive, healing, restorative and transforming. Jesus' love goes to the margins of society, it challenges cultural expectations, challenges even the law. Challenges us. Uncomfortable if you like. And I remember being arrested by this painting hanging in a museum – way before I became a Christian and it stayed with me for a long time.

Jesus' love is particularly good news for women, the bleeding woman (Matt 9:20-22), Luke 8: 43-48), the Samaritan woman at the well, Mary of Magdalen, and the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11) – what was Jesus writing in the sand? His love does not condemn but heals, forgives, restores and redeems. For those with jobs and lifestyles others disapprove of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10), who are beyond human decency - the daemon possessed man (Mark 5:1-12), are an outcast - the leper (Luke 17:11-19) and begging - the blind man (Mark 10:46-52), none of them are beyond Jesus' caring loving gaze, they are all touched by his love.



Rubelev Icon – the community of affirmation

And this love functions within the community of the Trinity which is one of mutual appreciation and affirmation. God the Father acknowledging the Son “with whom I am well pleased”. The son acknowledging that he cannot do anything without the Father. And the Son acknowledges the Spirit, the Paraclete, the helper who will come with transforming power.

The context of the passage is Nicodemus coming to Jesus and Jesus explaining about the need to be born again of the Spirit. I think that's because we need the Spirit to help us see, understand and receive God's love. God's love is also Good News to those in powerful positions like Nicodemus but his coming in the cover of darkness, fearful of being caught talking to Jesus, reminds us that following Jesus is costly it can cost reputations, livelihoods, even life for many Christians living in persecution throughout the world. What is it that Nicodemus has seen in Jesus that compels him to the point of him risking his reputation – potentially his status?

He is being drawn by Jesus to sit at the table. And we, you me and everyone, without exception, are invited to sit at the table. To take our place. There is a place at the table – can you see it - I wonder if you can picture yourself there in that loving embrace of the Trinity? I was once invited on a retreat to do that. To sit and listen in? Instead of the usual 'shitty committee' I had in my head I heard a different voice. I heard the Trinity talking about me in positive and loving way. It was transforming!

That invitation is there for whoever believes in him – in Jesus. Whoever says Yes! So in the same way I said yes to Tim about preaching, without really knowing what it meant I also said yes to God 31 years ago. My YES was just responding to the YES that God had already spoken over me. I saw the love of one of his followers, that radical, transforming love and I was curious, I wanted to know more, I took my place at the table.

Just like in Herbert's poem "Love bade me welcome." I like Peter felt shame "Yet my soul drew back, guilty of dust and sin." (George Herbert – Love III). Mark 12:30-31 -we are called to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength."^[a] 31 The second is this: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'^[b] There is no commandment greater than these."

Yet I know my love is limited, and at times just not there – Wesley's famous words in the Hymn "O thou that camest from above" say, kindle a flame of sacred love on the mean altar of my heart! I look inside and there's nothing. And of course at times we feel unworthy, yes we stray, yes we feel ineffectual and we mess up. Some of us struggle with the commandments to love our neighbours because we don't know how to love ourselves. Do we dare to go to the margins of ourselves, to bring the unlovely, ugly, hidden, shadowy parts of ourselves to Jesus for his transforming love to be at work? Or do we try and cover over, hide, pretend they are not there.

Can we bring that dirt under God's gaze?

To quote from Dirty Glory by Pete Greig,
God's story from beginning to end describes glory getting dirty and dirt getting blessed. The Creator made humanity out of the dust and if, on that day, we left a little dirt behind in the creases of his hands, it was surely a sign of things to come....'God made him who had no sin to be sin for us.' The Word didn't just pretend to become flesh... Jesus became sin for us, 'so that in him we might become the righteousness of God' (2 Cor. 5:21). This is the staggering message of Christ's incarnation: God's glory became dirt so that we - the scum of the earth - might become the very glory of God.

Tim shared last week about being touched by the love of God or the understanding of God's love in hearing Floyd McLung preaching in Holland on the Father Heart of God. Some have that moment of revelation but we need to go on learning more and more of the depths of love and allow it to transform us. Because he doesn't leave us there. His loving gaze transforms us. God's love, if we allow it, transforms us – how – moment by moment acceptance of, acknowledgment of it and gratitude for it? And it transforms us into the likeness of His Son and then in turn we too are invited to be

agents of this transformational love in our world. As Yein reminded us we have the Good News of that Treasure within us. We too are called to love at the margins, in the mess and dirt, to love the unlovely and unlovable.

I need to keep returning again and again to God's love as my good friend Mary Godfrey reminds me it's a lifetime's work to know in part as we will never understand fully the love of God. Find whatever it is that will help you to know God's love more. Some books I found helpful. Henri Nouwen - Inner Voice of Love, Life of the Beloved. Julian of Norwich Enfolded in Love.

I've had a couple of songs playing in my head especially when I started to prepare this. One was Tina Turner's What's love got to do, got to do with it? What's love but a second-hand emotion? What's love got to do, got to do with it? Who needs a heart when a heart can be broken? Some of us are in need of open-heart surgery. Maybe our hearts have grown hard and cold through disappointment and hurt. We have hardening of the "oughteries". The heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart. Jeremiah - I will give you a new heart - not a heart transplant but a heart that is softened and yielding and pulsing with God's love for the world.

I wonder for some of us if that's the song that plays in our heads, because our hearts have been broken? That we've not encountered enough love in our lives and have judged love from the world's perspective not God's. Can I encourage us therefore to hang out with VIPs and VLPs. Very Inspiring People and Very Loving People. To spend time learning about God's love and listening to the Inner Voice of Love, God's love which is a great big YES over us and our lives.

The other song I had going round my head is: What the world needs now is love, sweet love

It's the only thing that there's just too little of. What the world needs now is love, sweet love No not just for some, but for everyone.

Therefore Brothers and Sisters let us learn how to be loved by God, and in turn love one another as God has first loved us. For love casts out all fear and covers over a multitude of sins. Let's celebrate that love and Praise God that he is indeed love and take it demonstrate it in all we do and say and think and are. I finish with the words of another song also found in as a meditation Celtic Daily Prayer.

When I look at the blood (Geoffrey Birtill)

All I see is love love love

When I stop at the cross

I can see the love of God

But I can't see competition

I can't see hierarchy

I can't see pride or prejudice

Or the abuse of authority

I can't see lust for power

I can't see manipulation
I can't see rage or anger or selfish ambition

When I look at the blood
All I see is love love love
When I stop at the cross
I can see the love of God

But I can't see unforgiveness
I can't see hate or envy
I can't see stupid fighting;
Or bitterness or jealousy
I can't see empire building
I can't see self-importance
I can't see back stabbing or vanity
Or arrogance

When I look at the blood
All I see is love love love
When I stop at the cross
I can see the love of God

And I see surrender sacrifice
Salvation humility
Righteousness faithfulness
Grace forgiveness
Love love love
Love love love
Love love love
Love love love
(Repeat)