

God so loved the world

John 3:16 ‘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.

¹⁶ οὕτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν κόσμον, ὥστε τὸν υἱὸν τὸν μονογενῆ ἔδωκεν, ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν μὴ ἀπόληται ἀλλ’ ἔχη ζωὴν αἰώνιον.

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.

¹⁷ οὐ γὰρ ἀπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν υἱὸν εἰς τὸν κόσμον ἵνα κρίνη τὸν κόσμον, ἀλλ’ ἵνα σωθῆ ὁ κόσμος δι’ αὐτοῦ.

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.

¹⁸ ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν οὐ κρίνεται· ὁ δὲ μὴ πιστεύων ἤδη κέκριται, ὅτι μὴ πεπίστευκεν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ μονογενοῦς υἱοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ.

¹⁹And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.

¹⁹ αὕτη δέ ἐστιν ἡ κρίσις ὅτι τὸ φῶς ἐλήλυθεν εἰς τὸν κόσμον καὶ ἠγάπησαν οἱ ἄνθρωποι μᾶλλον τὸ σκότος ἢ τὸ φῶς· ἦν γὰρ αὐτῶν πονηρὰ τὰ ἔργα.

²⁰For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.

²⁰ πᾶς γὰρ ὁ φαῦλα πράσσων μισεῖ τὸ φῶς καὶ οὐκ ἔρχεται πρὸς τὸ φῶς, ἵνα μὴ ἐλεγχθῆ τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ·

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.’

²¹ ὁ δὲ ποιῶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἔρχεται πρὸς τὸ φῶς, ἵνα φανερωθῆ αὐτοῦ τὰ ἔργα ὅτι ἐν θεῷ ἐστὶν εἰργασμένα

INTRODUCTION

Thanks to Dean Markham, and to everyone for making me welcome as always, and it is a real honour and privilege to stand in this beautiful Chapel – as I did in the old Chapel to preach at Ian’s ordination to the priesthood nearly twenty years ago. Thank you for this invitation.

1 WHO SAYS IT?

John 3.16 is probably the most famous verse in the scriptures (or, possibly John 11.35, ‘Jesus wept’ but that’s more of an expression of frustration, and those who use it probably have no idea where it is from or what it means!). Jn 3.16 is everywhere, on tee-shirts, bumper stickers, crazies in the street wearing sandwich boards or thrusting flyers in your hands . . .

But it is also one of the most frequent verses quoted in all your TV evangelists’ stations, usually from a large King James Bible bound in black leather, which they keep thumping, and with which they would probably thump a biblical scholar like me!

The paradox is – who actually says these famous words?

When you get a moment today, take a look in your Bible. Many versions indicate that it is the very words of Jesus, especially those that put **Jesus’ words in red letters**. But even many of those which stick with all black print have quotation marks that end at 3.21, making the whole of today’s gospel passage the words of Jesus: e.g. KJV, ASV, ESV, JB and NJB. Interestingly, TNIV and

RSV close the quote after 3.15, making this passage a comment from the narrator, or the gospel writer – but, significantly, NRSV and NRSVue (the latest and best scholarly English translations) have gone back to it being Jesus’ words.

Because I am a anal biblical scholar with OCD (Pope Francis did give me the top academic theological prize in the world in the presence of your Dean and President just for counting all the verbs in the Greek text of the gospels to demonstrate that they are actually about Jesus!), I did a quick check on foreign language versions that I had immediately to hand, and I discovered that French, Portuguese, Spanish, and German versions tend not to use quotation marks at all. Some Italian translations have it as *not* Jesus, but the narrator or evangelist, while more recent ones (Nuova Riveduta, 1994) has it as Jesus’s words, as does the Romanian (Cornilescu 2014) and the New Korean Revised Version!

This is extraordinary – John 3.16 is the most famous verse in the Bible, but the world’s top scholars and bible translators across the world’s languages cannot agree who says it!!

To understand this, we need to go further back into what is also probably the most famous chapter of John’s gospel, if not the whole Bible, John 3, with its famous story of Nicodemus coming to Jesus ‘by night’ out of fear, and being told ‘you must be born again’, hence why it is such a favourite of TV evangelists.

The chapter is a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, with lots of questions and answers from both of them through verses 2 to 10, where Jesus asks Nicodemus, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?” Up to this point, it is obvious who says what. Jesus then carries on speaking in the first person, “I have told you these things”, about the Son of

Man, and about Moses with the bronze serpent until v.15 – and that is where some translations put the closing quotation marks.

The problem is that the original Greek manuscripts, like the French and German versions, do not have quotation marks, nor, for that matter, any kind of punctuation marks, even things like commas and full stops (what you call ‘periods’) – or even spaces between the words! You just work out who is saying what from the context. But the problem here is where does Jesus stop speaking and the narrator, or the gospel writer, take over? It has to end by verse 22, which tells us that “After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside” – which means that today’s gospel reading, John 3.16-21 is unclear whether it is meant to be the words of Jesus or those of the narrator/gospel-writer. The same thing happens with the conversation of John the Baptist with his disciples about Jesus being the bridegroom and John his ‘friend’ which runs from 3.25, ending with another famous verse “He must increase, but I must decrease”, the last obvious words of John. However, many versions continue the speech of John the Baptist down through verses 31 to 36 about the love of God, eternal life, and the wrath of God.

So the only conclusion we can draw is that it is *basically impossible* to distinguish the words of Jesus in John’s gospel, from the words of others like John the Baptist, or even of John the evangelist himself! In fact, we could all probably write in John's style after spending even just a little while immersed in the gospel. It has a limited vocabulary with a number of key words repeated over, and over, again like ‘look’, ‘see’, ‘witness’, ‘know’, ‘believe’, ‘faith’, ‘world’, ‘glory’, ‘abide’, ‘remain’, ‘hour’, ‘send’, and so forth – you all know them well, I am sure. Other favourite words are in contrasting pairs, ‘light and darkness’, ‘truth and falsehood’, ‘life and death’, ‘above and below’, ‘love and hate’, ‘father and son’, and so on. The sentences tend to be short, but they build

on each other, in steps and stairs, going round and round in spirals, connecting and reconnecting. For me as a textual scholar, this makes it clear that someone has said these words over, and over, and over again, in their prayer, in their meditation – and in their teaching, until they have become one with the very heart of Jesus.

So that is **my first challenge** to you today – use this time in seminary to read, mark, meditate, and inwardly digest the words of the scriptures, especially those of Jesus, until they become part of your own vocabulary, in your heart and mind, so that when you speak the good news to people, you are speaking the words of Jesus.

2 WHAT DOES IT SAY?

In fact, whether this passage is seen as either the end of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, or as a separate comment by the evangelist, does not really matter. *Who* says it is less important than *what* it says, for it is one of the supreme passages of this gospel, full of John's favourite vocabulary and themes, including of course, this most famous verse in the Bible, 3.16.

But this verse, rich in the love of God, is set within a *whole series of contrasts*. Throughout his gospel, John seems very fond of balancing sets of contrasting opposites such as 'above and below', 'life and death', 'truth and falsehood'. Such pairings are also found in much Greek literature, especially in its philosophy, and within Judaism, notably in the Dead Sea Scrolls found at Qumran. Again, therefore, here we can see how the evangelist seeks to explain the gospel using words and ideas accessible to his own day, but which also have had such a profound influence upon the whole of human history ever since.

John's habit as seeing things in contrasting pairs and his understanding of the 'heavenly realm' as opposed to the earthly sometimes lead to accusations of *dualism* on his part, seeing everything as either a positive or negative.

Certainly, the dualism inherent in Greek philosophy tended to prize the heavenly above the earthly, seeing the latter as negative, and the physical, material world as something from which to escape. While it is true that John does sometimes use the term 'the world' in a negative sense for those opposed to God, especially in the Last Supper discourses, this section shows us that the world can never be seen totally negatively. 'For God so loved the **world**' tells us that it is the *world*, the *cosmos*, ὁ κόσμος, despite all its sin and shortcomings, which is the object of God's love, which has a universal scope.

Sadly, sometimes Christians act as if John 3.16 read, 'For God so loved the *church* that he gave . . .' in their neglect of the world! Back to your TV evangelists, even the great Billy Graham, often quoted this verse as being about individual rebirth/salvation: God so loved **you** – so **you** must 'be born again', leading to those famous altar calls, where people streamed forward to give their lives to Jesus.

Yet, I have to tell you that this is *not* what Jesus says. When Nicodemus questions him, Jesus responds, "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above/born again" and he repeats it again, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit" (3.5 and v.7). Then we have the direct command of Jesus in v.7: "You^a must be born from above/again" – and in the NRSV there is a little ^a to direct you to a footnote that explains that the Greek pronoun 'you' here is *plural*, ὑμεῖς. This is *not* about any individual or one person's salvation.

The whole thrust of this gospel is to make it abundantly clear that God acts for the *whole world* in his love for us all, in sending his “only Son” – “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 phrase which is repeated in v.18, recalls yet another Old Testament story, where Abraham is told to take “your son, your only son, Isaac whom you love” up the mountain for sacrifice (Gen. 22.2,12). Yet while Abraham was spared this ultimate sacrifice, God did not spare *his* Son, Jesus, but gave him so that the whole world, everyone, should not perish, but have eternal life”.

In fact, this is the ultimate choice that John puts before his readers: to perish apart from God, or to receive his gift of eternal life in his Son. There is no other option – for this is reason that “God sent his ‘only begotten’ Son into the world”.

3 WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES?

This idea of God “sending” Jesus is one of John's most frequent, occurring over fifty times in this gospel. Jesus’ favourite description of God the Father, is “the one who sent me”, ὁ πέμψας με (interestingly, it is first used by John the Baptist to answer the Pharisees’ questions in 1.33, but thereafter by Jesus in John 4.34; 5.23, 30, 37; 6.38, 44; 7.16, 18, 28,33; 8.16, 18, 26, 29; 9.4; 12.44, 49; 13.16, 20; 14.24; 15.21, 26; 16.5 – I told you I was OCD!). And the final usage is in last Sunday morning’s gospel, which I had the privilege of preaching upon up in Chicago for one of your alumni, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you”. I learned that passage by heart and declaimed it at my own ordination **FORTY** years ago next month – so please pray for me as I celebrate my ruby anniversary of being ordained as a minister of this gospel,

that “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 passage is also clear about *why* God sent his only Son – and it was not to condemn the world but to save it (3.17). The Greek verb, κρίνειν, *krinein*, means to critique or evaluate, to judge or to condemn, and it gives us English words like ‘crisis’ and ‘critic’. The word is repeated several times in verses 17, 18 and 19.

The sending of God’s only Son, the coming of Jesus into the world which “God so loves” provokes a *crisis* both for the world and for all who dwell upon it, a ‘critical moment’ of judgement and decision. It is not that Jesus is sent by God or comes primarily as a judge, to condemn the world, for those who do not believe are already lost in their darkness and evil deeds (3.18-19). Instead, he comes to *save*, that they might turn to him and receive eternal life.

It is often thought, again by your TV evangelists using this passage, that judgement is something which happens at the End of all time and space: “are you ready for Judgement Day?” But John makes it clear that this deciding, this judgement, is already happening in every ‘critical moment’ we face in the present, in the here and now. As you know, we call things to do with the End ‘eschatology’, because *eschaton* means ‘end’ in Greek). Johannine scholars talk about John’s ‘realized eschatology’ meaning that it is being realized already in the present, with the coming of Jesus into the world to save us.

Of course, the coming of light into darkness creates shadows, and this, says John, is the *crisis*, the judgement, because some prefer to remain in the shadows (3.19). Thus, here we have another contrast, between those who practise what is true, who come to the light, and those who do evil, who hide (3.20-21). But

since Jesus comes *not* to condemn the world but to *save* it, it is not the case that only those who do truth may come forward. Those who do not know how to live truly, or who stumble in the darkness, may come to the light as Nicodemus does by night and find in him love and acceptance. Later in the gospel, as Nicodemus comes more and more out into the open, into the light, even to helping Joseph of Arimathea to bury Jesus, we will also read of Judas, who leaves Jesus to go out into the darkness of the night, “and it was night” (13.30). The options, these opposing contrasts of light v. darkness, day and night, life or death, are always before us at each *critical* moment of our lives, which is why God sent his Son into the world, “so that everyone who believes in him should not perish but have eternal life”.

CONCLUSION

After all of this, I feel as though I should end with a Billy Graham altar call! Except that you have all already ‘given your lives to Jesus’ – otherwise you would not be here in the first place. But what this passage makes abundantly clear, is that this is never a once and for ever decision; it is ‘realized’ in every moment, every ‘critical’ moment in our lives, and in the lives of the whole world, that “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”. To proclaim that good news is what I was ordained for forty years ago – and what you are preparing for, and indeed what you are doing now, whether you are students, or faculty, or staff. Jesus’ challenge, Jesus’ ‘altar call’ if you like, is the same now as on that first Easter evening:

“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 19.21) – there is a job to be done in this world, especially at this ‘*critical*’ moment of ‘*crisis*’ and judgement – and may God bless you richly in that task.