



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

The Fourth Sunday of Lent

Sunday, March 14, 2021

Scripture Passages: Numbers 21:4-9 & John 3:14-21

+ In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The verse that's embedded in our Gospel this morning is a verse that we've often seen on roadside signs - often called our favourite bible verse, and if you know any bible verse, it's most often the one you'll know.

A Presbyterian minister friend used to regularly begin his sermons by saying "For God so loved the world, . . ." and then invited the congregation to complete the verse. It was a thing; really quite a beautiful thing. And I get why he did that. And I really get that in the midst of a pandemic.

Because here Jesus articulates in this statement what Martin Luther called "the Gospel in a nutshell" – that if you can carry round those few words with you through life, you will know powerfully that God is fundamentally a God of love, that love is the logic by which the kingdom of God runs, and that God's love trumps everything in the end.

But if I'm honest, I've had to grapple with our Gospel passage this morning because in true biblical fashion the words may be economical but the reverberations from those words are much more extravagant and far-reaching.

First – using the imagery of the story of Moses making and holding up a bronze serpent to effect healing whenever the children of Israel are bitten by a poisonous snake – Jesus says to Nicodemus – because that's who he's speaking with in this portion of the Gospel – you remember that Nicodemus had come to him by night to ask some questions – so Jesus tells him that the Son of Man – Jesus will be lifted up – a bit like that serpent in the book of Numbers, again, to effect healing.

And that's interesting, because you see, unlike the other Gospels, John's Gospel presents the crucifixion not as an event of horror and humiliation, but as a triumph and a great lifting up. This is really important as we approach the difficulty and seriousness of Holy Week and the day of the crucifixion. As one commentator said for John, "it's the moment of coronation where Jesus' kingship is fulfilled and proclaimed.

And, in this moment, Jesus is lifted high for everyone to see. So, that in the words of Simeon in the Gospel of Luke we can all say in recognition, in acknowledgement: "My eyes have seen the savior whom you have prepared for all the world to see; a light to enlighten the nations, and the glory of your people, Israel." I think that it's beautiful that these words are embedded so firmly in our daily office; that they are prayed every day – all around the world – words of recognition that Jesus is the Messiah.

But there's more, because the cross actually does something. Just like when the Israelites looked at the bronze serpent they were able to be healed, the cross has the power to heal and give life too. But, according to John, gazing on it isn't enough. We need to have faith. We need to be moved to believe. Which is, of course, what the entire third chapter of the Gospel of John is all about."

In the beautiful translation called The Message – one I often turn to when I'm struggling with a passage of scripture, this is the way Eugene Peterson expresses John 3:16:

"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.

Jesus says "everyone who believes..." will have eternal life, which perhaps implies a different outcome for those who DON'T believe. But if we read on in the next verse Jesus states that, "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Period.

But then comes that hard part about people who do not believe being under a death sentence. But it's important to understand what that means - the "judgment" to come is not punishment as such but simply the crisis that befalls those who will not come out of the darkness for fear of the light. It is not judgment as punishment, but judgment as crisis, as tragedy, as loss. God comes in love to redeem this loss, turn this tragedy into victory, and demonstrate true power through sheer vulnerability and sacrifice.

Quite often our lives operate according to the more traditional belief that security comes not through vulnerability and sacrifice but through power and aggression. We live according to that logic because we live in a world that looks for security not only through power but also through wealth and consumption, and we are taught from a very early age to avoid true vulnerability – and the truly vulnerable – at all costs.

So, sacrifice? Sure, when we can afford to. Love our enemies? Maybe if everything else is taken care of first. Vulnerability? Only if there is no other choice.

Here's another thing that keeps coming back to me about this gospel: the whether you like it or not quality about these words.

Notice that God doesn't ask our permission first before sending Jesus to die for us. That's interesting. That's interesting because, think of the claim a person – any person – has on us once they've saved our life, let alone if they've died doing it.

But lest I interpret this wrongly as just emotional or spiritual manipulation – an important thing must be said here, something crucial – something literally cross-informed, cross-shaped. God doesn't give his only Son to hold something over us. We really need to be clear about this.

God gives us his only Son whether we like it or not; whether we walk away from that sacrifice or not; whether we resist that life and love or not. It is a free offering, borne out of unconditional love. And at the heart of it is the knowledge that all things shall be reconciled in Christ. All things – because God doesn't come into the world to condemn it. God comes to LOVE the world.

In the face of such love there is no bargaining and, ultimately, no control whatsoever. In the face of unconditional love, we are powerless. Yes, perhaps we can choose to accept it or not, perhaps we can run away from it, but we can't influence it, manipulate it, or control it. In the face of this kind of love, we are powerless. And only when we've died to all of our delusions of actually being in control do we realize that such loss of perceived freedom and power is actually life.

God's love, you see, is tenacious. And so God's love will continue to chase after us, to hold onto us and redeem us all the days of our lives, whether we like it or not. It's irresistible.

So this scripture – the one we know so well - renders us powerless in a world literally hell-bent on accumulating and exercising power. That's an unsettling thought. Then again, maybe as we remember God's tenacious love we might also realize that, precisely because this is the one relationship in our lives over which we have no power, it is also the one relationship we can't screw up.

Because God created it, God maintains it, and God will bring it to a good end, all through the power of God's vulnerable, sacrificial, and ever so tenacious and ultimately irresistible love – As St. Paul says in Colossians and we say in our Eucharistic prayer #3 – “ALL things shall be reconciled in Christ.”

All this reminds me, it won't surprise you to hear, of my beloved George Herbert in the one poem that people know of his. Rather like John 3:16 – that one piece of scripture we all know. The poem is called Love. And it's about the struggle between Love – our Lord - and the believer – that's all of us. It's so very personal. So very like our Gospel this morning where the believer – Nicodemus, but really all of us - contends with God. So, we end where we began. Because God's love trumps everything in the end. Every. Single. Thing.

I end by reading it – but really praying it.

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
 Guiltie of dust and sinne.
 But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
 Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
 If I lack'd any thing.
 A guest, I answer'd, worthy to be here:
 Love said, You shall be he.
 I the unkinde, ungratefull? Ah my deare,
 I cannot look on thee.
 Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
 Who made the eyes but I?
 Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame
 Go where it doth deserve.
 And know you not, sayes Love, who bore the blame?
 My deare, then I will serve.
 You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat:
 So I did sit and eat.

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.