

Holy Cross Day The Medium is the Message John 3 vv13 to 17

In today's Gospel we hear probably the most well-known of all scripture verses – John 3:16. This passage, though, is also arguably the most misinterpreted of all scripture verses.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all use the phrase “kingdom of God” (kingdom of heaven in the case of Matthew) and its imagery to describe for us the good news that Jesus is preaching. This good news is nicely summed up by Mark: The kingdom of God is here, Jesus proclaims. Turn to God and believe this good news!

John, on the other hand, almost never uses kingdom of God language. But, he does here in the encounter with Nicodemus. Nicodemus is a pharisee who has come to Jesus to discuss theological matters in the middle of the night and today's Gospel story is a part of that conversation. Jesus has told Nicodemus that seeing the kingdom requires a spiritual re-birth into a new family. And this new *life* is marked by a new *quality* of life. Eternal life is not focused on life after death or in this mysterious place we call “heaven”. Eternal life refers to the new and abundant life that Jesus models and invites people to live along with him. The word “eternal” comes from the Greek word *aion* (eon) – it is an age, or a period of time, having a particular characteristic or quality, like the Bronze Age or the Industrial Age. *Aiōnios* – eternal – does not focus on the future *per se*, but rather on the *quality* of the *age* ([165](#) /*aiōn*) it relates to. Therefore, believers live in “*eternal* ([166](#) /*aiōnios*) life” right *now*, experiencing this *quality of God's life* now as a *present possession*. (see Bible Hub's Greek “HELPS Word-studies” for entry #166).

How is this new life possible? How is it that we live eternal life – the abundant life of God – in the here and now? John gives us the answer through the story that we hear in the Book of Numbers. “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” Well, that explains everything, right? Let's take a look at that story to get at what John is trying to teach us.

The Israelites have been rescued from Egypt – from the unequal social/economic system characteristic of every empire in which the goal is the quest for power in the form of wealth, land, and status (position, property, and pocketbook is how I like to put it). But, the Israelites are not enjoying roughing it in the desert with God, learning how to put aside the way of life they'd lived in Egypt in favour of sharing everything, caring for everyone, co-operating rather than competing. They fondly remembered the ever-present lure of power in Egypt. Just like today in our society, those who “have not” are convinced that they could have all they could ever dream of if they work hard enough or step on enough people in their way. And so, the Israelites longed to go back to Egypt and complained bitterly against Moses and against God. Poisonous snakes started biting and killing hundreds of Israelites and so, thinking that God must be punishing them for their complaining, they pleaded with Moses to talk to God on their behalf. God instructed Moses to make a snake of bronze and put it on a tall pole so that anyone who was bitten by a snake could look on the bronze snake and be healed.

The source of their death – the snake – became the source of their healing. The snake represented for them their turning away from God – their lust for power and wealth, their complaining against the ways of God. But when they realized the wrongness of their thinking and turned back to God, the snake, in God's hands, became their salvation. Salvation, I will remind you, means healing, rescue, deliverance. It comes from the primary Greek word *sos*.

So, John is trying to tell us that, when we look at Jesus lifted up on the cross, we look into the mirror of our own destruction. The forces that put Jesus on the cross – the greed and corruption of empire, the individual failings that cause us to participate in those things or to turn a blind eye, the violence that results – all of these things confront us as we look at the cross. How does this lead to our salvation?

I've said this before but it's worth hearing again: The familiar refrain that many Anglicans grew up with – and many still hear regularly – “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” – this refrain has steered our thinking in the wrong direction. This well-known phrase comes from John's Gospel and is much

more accurately translated “Behold the Lamb of God who lifts up the sins of the world.” You can see from today’s Gospel story that this is a crucial piece in what John is trying to teach us about Jesus’ death on the cross. Sins are lifted up so that they can be dealt with. Just like you don’t know you have a problem with cockroaches until you flick on the light and they go scurrying into the nooks and crannies. Lifting up the sin of the world into the light of day forces us to acknowledge those sins. Just like if we don’t go to the doctor to find out what’s wrong when we don’t feel well it doesn’t mean that what is wrong goes away. It means what is wrong is left unacknowledged, untreated, and it is not healed. We cannot mend brokenness if we don’t admit that it’s broken. We cannot mend brokenness if we don’t know something is broken.

Now this brings us back to John 3:16 – that well-known but sorely misunderstood scripture passage. Here is this verse put a different way now that we have a greater understanding of the rest of the story around it:

For God loved the world in this way: God gave the one and only Son, so that everyone who relies on, trusts, and follows Jesus will not perish but will now have abundant, joy-filled life. Indeed, God did not send Jesus into the world to judge the world, but to provide the opportunity for the world to see their faults and turn to God’s ways – to trust and follow Jesus – and be healed, rescued from the world’s ways of thinking and being that lead to never-ending division, competition, and exhaustion.

That probably didn’t sound much like the scripture verses you had to memorize in Sunday School but it is what it means for us who hold the cross as one of our most powerful symbols. Two more words in that famous scripture passage need a bit more explanation – a reminder for many of you.

God loved the world, we are told. This includes more than the people. World is “kosmos” and kosmos means “orderly arrangement; decoration”. And so, saving the world means not just the planet and its creatures but also the decorations we’ve added to it. God plans to redeem the imperfect human-made systems that have gone badly astray.

The other word is “believe”. Everyone who believes in Jesus will be saved. You didn’t hear the word “believe” in my translation because I used its definition instead. The word “believe” (piste), to have faith, means to rely on, to trust, and to follow Jesus. Obviously, this is not just a matter of accepting whether or not something is true, like I believe the earth is round. To believe in God is to trust in God, to rely on God, to follow God’s ways and, clearly, for this to happen we must be in relationship with God. And, of course, to follow God’s ways of love and compassion, forgiveness, and abundant generosity, that also just as clearly means we must be in right relationship with the other people with whom we share God’s world. From the book of Genesis where we hear, “It is not good for [humans] to be alone” to the throngs of people praising God in the book of Revelation, God lays out the desire for us to be in relationship – the one great family forming the body of Christ throughout the world.

The cross, and Jesus crucified on it, as Paul tells us, is both a stumbling block and foolishness to those who don’t understand it. Here is what Barbara Brown Taylor has to say about the message of the cross:

“Hello. It is so lovely to see you all here this evening. My message tonight will be brief and to the point. God is not in the business of protecting us from harm, and no amount of good behaviour will keep us safe. For evidence of this, see the cross. Instead, God is in the business of restoring us to life, which may involve some painful procedures. If we are willing to go through it and the operation is successful, our lives will not belong to us anymore. We will be God’s gifts to the world, and our ‘to do’ lists will have no end. If the operation is really successful, our good works will get us killed. P.S. Every day will be full of fresh astonishment and we will never, ever get bored.”

The message of the cross “is about how to stop trying to make it [according to] this world and fall in love with God instead. It is about God’s power, not ours.” In the 1960’s, Marshall McLuhan coined the phrase “the medium is the message” meaning how you say something often speaks louder than the actual words you are saying. Imagine, for example, if Mother Teresa in her popularity had accepted and kept money for all of the speaking engagements and public appearances she

was asked to do. And imagine that she then used that money to buy a big house and fancy clothes. Her message about giving to the poor and caring for the poor rather than for ourselves above all else would certainly have fallen flat, wouldn't it? The cross is a hard piece of the good news for us. "We are the lovers of a God who specializes in turning the world's values upside down. We are the followers of a Lord who waited tables and washed feet. We are the heirs of a Spirit who has power to revive the whole creation, [including] us, but only if we will allow it – by giving up all illusions that we know how to save ourselves and begging God, one more time, to show us how it is done." (Quotations are from Barbara Brown Taylor's book, *Teaching Sermons on Suffering: God in Pain*, p.134, 135).

When we look on the cross, when we put a cross around our necks, and we remember that we, together, are now the body that once hung on that hard wood to rescue the world, let us also remember that the medium is the message. 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. Let's get to work.