

## **John 3:14-21**

**March 11th 2018**

Growing up in a small Baptist community in Ireland one of the first things I ever learnt off by heart was John 3:16.

My parents were very devout Christians – our family life revolved around our local Baptist church. From we were no age my brother and I were in the Tiny Tots Sunday School Class. There we learned to sing many choruses, watch many flannel graph bible stories and learn our memory verses week by week. No memory verse was more important or more common than John 3:16

God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life (KJV)

This was the core of the gospel as we were nurtured in it.

It was also the one text used more than any other by the evangelist Billy Graham who passed away just a few weeks ago.

This morning I would like to take the passage from John 3 in two parts. To look first of all at verses 14-17 and then verses 18-21.

I want to develop two themes.

As we look at verses 14-17 I want to explore ‘Why we worship’

As we look at verses 18-21 I want to explore ‘How we are to live’

### **Why we worship**

Maybe that seems a strange theme to explore in a worship service, of course Christians worship, this is a worship service, we have worship in music, we sing hymns of praise and we worship God in our offering.

Ok, but why do we do it?

Is it tradition – because that’s the way we were brought up?

Is it fear – just in case God gets upset with us and things start to go wrong in life?

Is it to set an example – perhaps we’re raising a family and want our children to share the values that are espoused in a Christian context?

Does this passage in John’s gospel really help explain why Christian’s worship?

We find all the clues we need the language John uses:

The language of ‘lifted up’ is our first clue: the phrase appears twice in verse 14 and relates back to the story told in Numbers 21. It’s a strange story, it seems a

rather drastic and unkind way to treat the Israelites as they wander in the desert. Ok, so they are complaining and beginning to pine for the world they knew, the world of oppression in Egypt, but all the same, sending snakes seems a bit tough.

Whatever the rights and wrongs – and we could have an interesting discussion on whether God sent the snakes or that was the people’s interpretation of what was happening, or whether the snakes are metaphorical for the influence of evil among the people – whatever about all that, there comes a point in the story when they implore Moses to speak to God and ‘pray the Lord will take the snakes away from us’. God’s response is to tell Moses to make a ‘fiery serpent’ and put it on a pole so that those who look to the pole will be healed.

What I find really interesting about this passage is that God does not answer their prayer, he does not take the snakes away, instead he provides a way of healing for those bitten and afflicted.

They are in the desert, the snakes belong to the desert, there’s no point trying to get rid of the snakes, what’s needed is a cure. So, although the world around is not changed a source of salvation is provided through the serpent being lifted up on a pole.

Obviously we could spend more time exploring the story in Numbers but we’ve mined it enough for the purposes of understanding the significance of what in John 3, John records Jesus saying: As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so must the Son of Man (Jesus referring to himself) be lifted up in the midst of the wilderness that is our human experience without God, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

‘Lifted up’ – as becomes clear in the rest of the gospel, is a reference to Jesus lifted up on the cross and, raised from the dead, lifted up to glory and that looking to him, we might have eternal life.

Eternal life – What’s this eternal life? How are we to understand this concept of eternal life?

Some see it as an endless afterlife but the concept is richer than that for it has to do with life now as much as life beyond the grave.

Perhaps of the various references to eternal life the clearest indication of what John means by eternal life comes in John 17:3 – the opening section of Jesus prayer to the Father; ‘...this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.’

Eternal life is not simply an afterlife idea – though undoubtedly it contains that. In John eternal life is a way of speaking about life here and now, life of a

different calibre, life that brings a different way of seeing, a life that is lived in the light of the knowledge and presence of God as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

So eternal life is our second clue.

Then we arrive in verse 16 to the themes of love and of the world.

Love is a big theme in John's gospel, much more so than the other gospels and the term that is used for love isn't so much about feeling or emotion but about intentional action

You may remember how in John Chapter 13 it tells us that Jesus showed the full extent of his love for the disciples and how they should love one another by taking a towel and washing their feet – intentional action.

In Chapter 15 there is the call to love Christ by loving one another and Chapter 21 records the emotional encounter between Peter and the risen Christ 'Peter, do you love me..?'

John's understanding of the concept of love is intentional action, deeply relational and intimate. Love, in this context, is not merely a feeling or emotion. This is the kind of love that God has for the world – a relational love marked by the intentional action of giving and sending and sending the Son that the world might be saved, rather than condemned.

And, does John really mean the world? Yes, he does.

John has a grand vision of who Jesus is and who Jesus is for - John sets his introduction to Jesus in the context of the world – literally the kosmos.

You remember how John's gospel starts: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.

Unlike Matthew it's not Jesus Jewish credentials that matter, for Matthew tells the story of Jesus starting with Abraham

Unlike Luke it's not merely Jesus human credentials that matter, for Luke starts telling Jesus' story from Adam

For John – Jesus is for the world and when John speaks of God loving the world he is expressing a very big vision of how Jesus fits into the created order.

Why do Christians worship?

Are we gathered here merely out of tradition?

Are we gathered here out of fear?

Are we here simply because of the values represented?

No! We are here because God moved toward us in love.

We are here because that love was made clear in the lifting up of Jesus in death and resurrection that though we live in the midst of our own human frailness and fallenness, we look to him and have eternal life - which is to know the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom he sent for our salvation

We are here because we have encountered a God who loves the world, whose business is not fear and condemnation, but love and salvation.

This is why we worship!

This is why we join our voices in praise!

This is why we unite our voices and hearts in prayer!

For God so loved the world.... This is gospel, this is good news, this is why we worship.

### **18-21 How we are to live**

Verse 18 states, with confidence, that the person who believes in Jesus is not condemned. Verse 21 says that the person who does what is true comes to the light, that it might be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God. These are two very positive statements about those who put their faith in Jesus.

The first implies a life of confidence, a life free from fear of condemnation while the second implies a life of goodness and truthfulness because that's the idea of coming into the light

We are to live with confidence, not arrogance, but confidence knowing that we do not live under condemnation. More than that, we have been offered forgiveness because of Jesus' death on the cross for us. Through his death and resurrection we are reconciled with our creator, indeed the Bible speaks of how we are adopted into the family of God, as his children and can consider Jesus our brother.

It is these rich privileges that allow us to live with confidence, free from the fear of condemnation.

We are also called to live a life of goodness and truthfulness – which is the idea of living in the light.

Light and darkness are very important themes in John's gospel. In John 1, John speaks of Jesus as the true light that brings light into the world: 'In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.'

Later in John 9:5 – the story of the man born blind – Jesus declares that 'I am the light of the world...' and in John 12 there is an extended discourse on light in which Jesus refers to himself as the light and refers to his disciples as sons of the light then he says:

I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness. I do not judge anyone who hears my words and does not keep them, for I came not to judge the world, but to save the world.

To live such a life will require making judgements, the judgement of discerning light from darkness. The judgement of discerning what is faithful to the light that is in Jesus and what is contrary to faithful discipleship. The judgement of discerning what it means to live as children of the light (12:36)

This is not an easy matter but as Christians we shoulder the challenge to discern what is God glorifying and what is dishonouring, what is of the light and what is of darkness. We make these judgements not because we are any better than anyone else, not because it is our place to judge others – as we have just observed Jesus said he did not come to judge the world so who are we to judge others – but because the death and resurrection of Jesus is such a critical element to how we understand the world and how we see the world.

We believe he is the way, the truth and the life, his life, death and resurrection is the lens through which we see the world. The place that we give Jesus in our worship means that he is the touchstone of all that we understand as good and we cannot be indifferent to the choices and actions of ourselves, or others, or organisations, or states. Whatever is contrary to the light we see in Jesus, is darkness. It is the church's task to live in the light and be light in the darkness.

Often we have failed, too often we have preferred the darkness to light. The church in various places and at various times has justified and sanctified violence and war for its own ends. At different times, in different places Christians have promoted nationalism as somehow a godly thing excluding the stranger and the refugee. At different times, in different places the church and its people have, in an idolatrous manner claimed that God was on their side and against their enemies. At different times and in different places the church has hidden a dark side while claiming to represent the light.

Christian groups of every kind of denomination have been shamed into acknowledging their dark side and the scale of abuse that has been kept quiet. Many sincere Christian leaders, whether for the reputation of the church or

whatever reason, failed to let the light penetrate the darkness of abuse. The institutions that should be bearing witness to the light, the light of the world were seen by a watching world to have preferred darkness and profound damage has been done to the credibility of the church's witness to Christ.

All of us are tempted at some time, in some way, to excuse the darkness that may lie within us. It may be justifying the bitterness we harbour, our envy of other people, the gossip that destroys others' reputations, the greed that drives our ambitions, the dishonest claim and the pride the we nurture.

But the Christian has to be the last person to keep things in darkness because to do so is to undermine the credibility of our conviction that Jesus is the light of the world.

Whether as individuals or as a community we need always to recognise that the gift of living without condemnation is inseparable from the responsibility to live in the light. We should be people willing and wanting to live in the light so that it may be clearly seen that our deeds have been done in God.

These very familiar verses from John's gospel remind us

Why we worship

How we should live

We worship God because God moved toward us in love.

We worship because that love was made clear in the lifting up of Jesus in death and resurrection.

We worship because though we live in the midst of our own human fallenness we look to him and have eternal life - which is to know the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom he sent for our salvation.

We worship because we have encountered a God who loves the world, whose business is not fear and condemnation, but love and salvation.

We worship Jesus Christ because He comes from before and for the world, he comes to bring life (he is the way, the truth and the life) for those who will follow, he comes to enable us to step out of the realm of our darkness and into the light.

These words from John's gospel remind us how we should live.

We should live with confidence for the person who believes in Jesus is not condemned but we must live in the light, that it might be clearly seen that our deeds have be done in God and for his glory.

May our worship be whole hearted, may our lives be lived in the light. Amen.