

Hexham Trinity Methodist Church
Sunday 14th March 2021 - 10:30am
Sermon - Mothering Sunday - Lent 4

Readings: Colossians 3:12-17 & John 3:14-21

Prayer

Since I've become a parent I've realised that deep down within me are sayings and phrases that my parents use to say to me but I'd long forgotten. How have I discovered this? Well I find myself speaking to Jethro and suddenly hearing myself sounding very like my father! Somewhere deep in us all are words and phrases that have been said to us time and time again or that we use with those closest to us. To us they mean something very important but to others they might seem odd or out of context.

In our readings this morning is one of the most famous verses of scripture, John 3:16, '*for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believe in him shall not perish but have eternal life*'. It is a verse which is quoted and shared in so many different places but just like those phrases we use at home or with close friends it has a context, it has a story around it and that context and story help us, and most importantly those who've never heard the verse before, to understand it so much more than if we just read it or quote it on its own.

The story within which John records this great truth about God is the story of the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus which

we read earlier in John chapter 3. A story of a man who sees something in Jesus and wants to know more, a story in which Jesus explains what new life is all about and how everyone needs to be born again, born again in water and the spirit.

We pick up the story today at verse 14 which is part of Jesus explaining to Nicodemus how being born again is possible. Jesus explains that being born again will be made possible because he will be lifted up, on the cross, as Moses was lifted up and it is those who believe in the crucified Jesus that may have eternal life.

As we go on in the passage we get a number of analogies that help us to understand the reality of the offer of eternal life made to us by Jesus. In verses 17 we hear that God's desire is for the world to be saved not condemned, in verse 18 we hear about how that extends to individuals and the choice of condemnation or not condemnation, in verse 19 we hear about light and darkness and in verse 20 the connection between our beliefs about God and our actions.

These verses offer a very stark and binary choice between choosing to believe in Jesus and receiving eternal life or not believing in Jesus and facing condemnation. That might make you feel uncomfortable, how does a loving God, a gracious God, an understanding God offer such hard and stark choices. How can God hold condemnation and life in such a binary way, where here is the

more gentle offer of life in all its fullness, that we discover in John 10:10, we might ask.

Part of understanding our reaction to this story is to set alongside other parts of the gospels and scripture that help us understand God which give us a broader picture. However we don't do that to negate what is said here or to replace what is said here with other parts of the picture. Equally what is said here doesn't replace or negate other parts of the gospels. It is important to sit and learn from this passage as much as we sit and learn from other passages.

For me one of the most important words in this passage comes in v14 and is the word 'may'. That everyone who believes **may** have eternal life. It is a word which reminds us that we each receive an invitation from God. From a God who says here is my son, the beloved, who has come to earth for you, who has shown you the way of the kingdom, who has been lifted up for you, who has died and rose again for you, who offers you eternal life.

An invitation from God which comes in two parts. Firstly, do you believe this? Do you believe who Jesus is? Then, secondly, do you want to receive the gift of eternal life, do you want to have a relationship with me through Jesus, that's why the **may** is so important, everyone who believes **may** have eternal life - if they choose it.

There is a choice not just to make about do we believe who Jesus is, do we believe he died for us and for the world, but a choice of do we want to receive that gift of life, do we want to join the adventure with him, do we want a relationship with God.

That choice is important because God gives us free will and offers us that decision without any coercion or force, the choice to follow Jesus has to be ours and God is gracious enough to let us make that choice, even if we acknowledge who God is, even if we know and understand what Jesus has done for us, the may, gives us the choice to decide whether we want the gift of life, full life, eternal life or whether we don't. In giving us choice, in letting us make the decision we can do what we choose to do and we make that decision knowing the consequences, knowing the cost. For there are costs and consequences of following Jesus or not following Jesus and God wants us to make the decision being fully aware of the consequences and the blessings. Of course the decision is one we offered over and over again and God is always ready for his people to follow him.

This passage reminds us that God offers a choice, that each of us needs to make a choice about following Jesus, entering into a relationship with him and helping others to make that choice as well.

One of the reasons it's important to read John 3:16 in the context of the whole chapter is that whilst this passage reminds us about

the choice we all have to make it Christian life doesn't stop there. This passage also speaks about the life we live in God, in verses 20 and 21 we read about our deeds, our actions, our day to day life and how they are understood in light of our decision or not to have a relationship with Jesus.

We're told in verse 21 that the deeds of those who come into the light, follow Jesus, are done in the light and will be seen plainly, that they are done in and for the light of God.

Over the last couple of weeks of lent we've been thinking about what it means to live as those who follow Jesus, about how we need to grow in our relationship with God and not just stand still or stay at the start line. We've thought about how we need to let Jesus have complete authority in all parts of our lives.

These later verses of John 3 bring together that choice to follow Jesus with those thoughts from the last couple of weeks about how we live well as those who have chosen to follow Jesus. In lent as we reflect on our Christian life we need to reflect on all of this, have I made the decision to follow Jesus, to receive the gifts of life and have a personal relationship with God, have I moved forward from where I started, am I letting Jesus have authority in my life. We reflect on these things and ask these questions during Lent so that when we get to Easter we are in the right place with God to mark and celebrate Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

We also reflect on these questions as they remind us what it means to the people of God, to be God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved as Paul puts it in Colossians. Those deeds in light that John speaks about in 3:20 and 21 are picked up in what Paul says in Colossians when he tells us to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.

Paul also gives instructions in Colossians about being people who forgive regularly as God forgives, to put on love and let the peace of God rule in our hearts. There is much more I could say about each of these but I'm aware on zoom less is very much more but they are important verses to read and reflect on.

If we are people who choose to follow Jesus, who choose to accept that gift of eternal life then we must live as those who have made that choice.

Doing this is about being rooted in our relationship with God which is made possible by Jesus, by living as those whose deeds are done in and for the light of Christ, as those who seek the fruits of the spirit and not the ways of the world. When we live in this way we live as a the family of God, reaching out to one another as mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers just as God does to us. On this mothering Sunday when we can't go home to our families or our mother church in each other we find the family that cares for us and loves us as God does.

Nicodemus goes to find Jesus, he goes to find the one in whom he has seen something that attracts his attention and he needs to know more about. That conversation leads him to discover the gift of eternal life which is available to all through Jesus.

It's a gift which doesn't always lead down an easy path, its a gift which demands our life, our all, to quote an Easter hymn, its a gift which leads to letting go of our authority and giving it to Jesus, it's a gift which leads to a forgiven, free, new, full and eternal life.

As we come to the mid point of lent, as we've thought about moving forward with God, letting Jesus be our authority, today I want to remind us that all this is built on making that decision to follow Jesus, not just believing he is there but choosing to follow, choosing to accept the offer of full and eternal life which is only made possible by his death on the cross and his resurrection to new life.

As we turn to face Jerusalem this lent, as Jesus did, I invite you all whether for the first time or the hundredth time to choose to follow Jesus, to let him be your Lord and Saviour and to lead you on the journey of eternal life. For whatever decisions we make in life accepting this invitation is the most important the best decision we can ever make. Amen.