

## Lent 4, 11 March 2018, CCSY

Num 21:4-8; Eph 2:1-10; John 3:1-17

‘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.’

John 3:16, a verse beloved of Anglicans as one of the so-called ‘comfortable words’ from the service of Holy Communion in the Book of Common Prayer; one of the best-known texts of the New Testament, and most apposite for this Refreshment Sunday (hence the flowers and the rose vestments). Well-known, but perhaps not always well interpreted – often trotted out as the Gospel reduced to one sentence, and quite some reduction that would have to be.

I think our reception of this text – and the image of God that is drawn from it – hinges on how we hear that little word ‘so’: ‘God *so* loved the world . . .’

Does ‘so’ here refer to the extent to which God loved the world, as in ‘God loved the world *sooo* much that he gave his only Son’, or does it refer to the manner in which God loves the world, as in ‘So God loved the world (as the BCP renders it); God loved the world in this way: that he gave his only Son’?

It’s not an ‘either/or’ kind of question, but the nuance is an important one.

I grew up in a tradition where I was taught in Anglican schools and churches to understand ‘so’ in terms of quantity: see how much God loved the world – he surrendered his only Son to a brutal death – that’s how much; to which my response, and that of my friends (most of whom don’t go to church anymore) was equal measures of guilt and fear.

This is the ‘Mel Gibson view’ of John 3:16, who, not satisfied with Cecil Alexander’s ‘we may not know, we cannot tell what pains he had to bear’, in the equally well-known hymn ‘There is a green hill far away’, set out to know and tell in graphic detail exactly what pains Jesus had to bear, in his epic film *The Passion*.

I was so nauseated by Gibson’s movie I had to walk out of the cinema, and to this day have not seen the rest of it. Nausea soon gave way to anger.

Reflecting on that reaction in a sermon sometime afterwards, I asked whether we thought Jesus’ suffering was somehow greater in quality and quantity than that of war veterans, or children with cancer, or persecuted minorities, or any one of a number of traumatic human experiences we could name? And, if so, whether it being somehow ‘worse’, or more inversely proportional to his innocence was what made Jesus’ suffering significant?

Or, whether what matters in the end is not how *much* Jesus suffered, just *that* he suffered, as we all do?

Mel Gibson had his revenge, as – at that point in my sermon – someone got up and walked out!

If we lean more towards the other reading of that little word, 'so': 'God loved the world in this way, that he gave his only Son', what difference might that make to our journey with Jesus to the foot of the cross this Lent?

'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son . . .' I've forgotten more Greek than I ever learned, but blowing the dust off my grammars, I was reminded that the construction used by the evangelist translated here as 'so' and 'that', emphasizes consequence. The nature of God's love for the world is such that the self-giving which culminated in the cross is primarily a consequence of that sort of love, more so than a proof of love.

God gives his Son, in the first instance to be born – to take flesh – which is of course to die.<sup>1</sup> The Incarnation of John's majestic prologue is the great salvific act of this gospel, in which Jesus dies the death he does because of the life he lives: embodying to the end the love he experienced uniquely as the only Son of the One he called Father. Such are the immeasurable riches of God's grace towards us in the one who is always being lifted up for the life of the world.

And in the giving of the Son for the life of the world, we are able to grasp something about the way that God is 'for us' eternally; which is to take nothing away from the extent of that love – it's depth or tenacity. On the contrary: we understand that divine self-emptying within the greater context of God's ceaseless creating and redeeming activity, rather than as some sort of rush of divine blood, if you'll pardon the pun.

'So that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.' The faith to which this love invites us is not some sort of redemptive transaction or economy of exchange – a kind of Pascalean wager. Rather it's a freely given response to being 'so' loved, to being loved in this way: that God would give Gods' very self so completely in order that we might have life in all its fullness.

One of our honorary Authorised Lay Ministers, Jamie Miller, wrote a poem a couple of years ago when we were working on our Mission Statement. In a sentence, that Mission Statement (which you can read on the website: [www.ccsy.org.au/mission](http://www.ccsy.org.au/mission)) speaks of how we seek to respond in kind to God who loves us in this way. Jamie writes:

For God so loved the world,  
that he gave us the One who walks through locked doors, overturns tables,  
knows what it is to feel hunger of many kinds, and dust on skin.

For God so loved the world that she gives us the one who pours out bread  
and wine and tells us to value broken things as signs of what is fully given.

For God so loved the world that he teaches us belief is not an 'option',  
but is what sobs in gardens and takes the cup when it doesn't pass.

She teaches us belief is not a social contract;  
it is not terms and conditions to be agreed to before proceeding.

But it is the grace of 'Come, be, know yourself in my love,  
which will [stop at nothing] to reach you.'

Richard Treloar

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<sup>1</sup> To say 'incarnation' is to say 'cross', as theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar reminds us.