

John 3: 11-17
(combined)
(Romans 4: 11-17)

Wesley UCA
Lent 2 A 20/03/11

Believing Like Your Life Depends on It

One of the things I enjoy in life is watching sport on television--it's one of favourite relaxation pastimes, especially in footy season. And I've even been known to plan my trips to the US at the right time for the baseball season there. When watching these games you often see posters or banners lifted up in the viewing stands; sometimes the camera will zoom in a particularly humorous or provocative sign. Last year during a Manly Sea Eagles rugby league game, I saw one that said: "We are Manly. Everybody hates us. And we don't care!" Now that might be the ultimate in loyalty, defiance and arrogance. However, the most popular sign in America--and you can probably see these at every game in every sport there--this sign just reads:

John 3:16.

Sometimes, in fact, these signs will just say **3:16** because it is assumed that everyone who sees it will just know that this is a reference to the most famous verse of John's gospel, and arguably the most famous verse in the Bible. It has appeared on innumerable postcards and bookmarks. It has been memorised by many generations of Sunday School children. I've seen it on t-shirts and in exquisite needlepoint. I once made my grandmother a quite ugly red sparkle and glue picture of it, which she treasured like a great work of art. Many of us could probably say the verse from memory right now, and some of us cannot ever read or hear these words without a particularly eloquent musical setting of them ringing in our ears.

"God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son,
that whoever believes in him should not perish
but have eternal life."

I guess we should probably be grateful for its popularity, of course, because at least it is *nice* verse--unlike some other parts of the Bible. Well, at least *apparently* nice. Once I heard a TV presenter ask a sports fan about the signs, implying that they might not an appropriate way of proclaiming one's faith, and the fan replied: "They are just signs of love."

If only! If only that's what they really were. But, sadly, more often than not these are actually signs of judgement. Here are some of our fellow Christians declaring for all the world to see that we have all the answers to eternal life and everyone else is damned unless they think and believe exactly as we do.

This one verse--or rather the way this one verse has been put to use in Christian tradition--proves how awfully easy it is to quote the Bible out of context and make it mean anything we want it to. John 3:16 should only be read and understood in its context. In John's gospel this verse is just a small part of Jesus' long pastoral reprimand to Nicodemus upon his failure to understand the concept of being 'born again' into eternal life. While it's highly unlikely that Jesus ever uttered these particular words, and certain that they were not written by anyone who even knew Jesus personally in his lifetime, the theological message here is no less important. Within John's second century Christian community, 'born again' was always a reference to baptism. And in this passage there is also a clear literary image of the crucifixion--the 'lifting up' of the Son, as Moses had lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. These are both strong, positive, metaphoric statements about the saving power of God at work in the world.

But what is most astounding is that here--unlike in the other gospels and much more akin to the writings of Paul--John's gospel says that this saving work as it is revealed in Jesus is not merely for a few 'chosen people' (as it had been described in the ministry of Moses) but rather this time it is for the love of the whole world. And let me be clear here that John uses the word *cosmos*, which is not the same as the word for ordinary daily life, for the life of humanity, nor even for the concept of earth itself--but for *everything*, for heaven and earth, for all creation, for all living things, for all that is known, for all that we can imagine, for all that only God knows. This is the ultimate 'big picture,' and the most inclusive statement possible.

The literary, social and theological context of these words--described as they are with the remembered reality of Jesus' ministry--is the single most outstanding proclamation of salvation we could find in all of scripture.

No wonder we adore these words! And perhaps if the sports fans with their banners really wanted to make a sign of love, at least some of their signs would also read John 3:17:

"For God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world through him might be saved."

For John--and by extension for his community--here in words from nearly twenty centuries ago we have the beginnings of a liberal, open, cosmic Christian theology that even today is difficult for some to embrace.

But, then, believing in Jesus is not all that easy. It's not for the faint-hearted or the weak-minded.

Believing in Jesus means believing that the world is worth saving from all destructive forces.

Believing in Jesus means believing that it is possible for human beings to reflect and reveal the essence of God.

Believing in Jesus means believing that goodness is stronger than evil, that healing is always possible, that even death is not the last word for human connection with God.

Believing in Jesus means believing that nothing can destroy the truth of God:

no controversy, no so-called heresy, no theological difference or interpretive failure, no banners hung in sports stadiums, nor even the familiarity that leads to complacency--none of these has the power to destroy or even diminish the divine truth that shines out from the cross brighter and stronger than even the bronze serpent of Moses lifted up in the desert sun.

Here are arms outstretched on a cruel cross ready to embrace all of creation--and wounded hands still strong enough to forever hold the whole world.

Here, once and for all, is salvation from every possible frailty or evil.

Here is the only real hope for the world--that it is possible for us to love each other with God's love.

It is to this revelation that we are called by these familiar and so often misunderstood words of John's gospel, each of us challenged anew to believe in the power of such love as though our life--and the life of the world--depends on it.

Because it does.

Rev. J.R. Huggett