

From the Rector's Study, the Rev. Bryce Sangster
Sunday, March 10, 2024, Lent IV
Numbers 21:4-9, Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22, Ephesians 2:1-10, John 3:14-21

This part of John's gospel contains perhaps the most famous and best-known verse in the Bible. *For God so love the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.*

But what is the next verse? *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.*

This seems to be more about salvation not judgment. And the question becomes; what is salvation about? The discussion often centres around salvation from and what we will face if there is not conversion and an expression of belief in the next life.

But is that the truth?

There is Blaise Pascal's wager which goes something like this:

If God exists then theists will enjoy eternal bliss, while atheists will suffer eternal damnation. If God does not exist then theists will enjoy finite happiness before they die, and atheists will enjoy finite happiness too, though not so much because they will experience angst rather than the comforts of religion. Regardless of whether God exists, then, theists have it better than atheists; hence belief in God is the most rational belief to have.

There is a different way of understanding this:

Those who believe in God and live their lives from this belief don't have it as good. Because God is all loving and merciful then both those who believe and those who don't will enjoy eternal bliss, although there may be some consequence to the nonbelief.

If God does not exist, then those who believe may delay enjoying life in the present in the expectation of enjoyment in the next life. And miss out in enjoyment in this life.

But hold on a minute: There is the reality of the Kingdom of God in the now and not just waiting for the next life. It is subtle and mostly hidden but there. And this means we can move from the power of the emperor to the power of the cross. Moving from the way of the world and survival of the fittest, whatever that means to co-operation and mutual benefit. Yes, those who don't believe can also benefit. But there is also another factor:

Meaning of life. I grew up in the church and believed in God, but when I went away to college and university, I got away from it, (not a very original story.) But in my second year away from home in business school I could not see myself following the

path of completing my degree and then spending most of my adult life working for a company which made a product or offered a service of some kind. For me the prospect was depressing. The reason being, I had no passion for anything which would last for any reasonable length of time.

I changed universities and returned to God and spiritual activities and groups including the church camp. And a renewed passion. The new plan was to finish my degree and work in the office for a church or a social service organization or charity helping people. It was only later that priesthood became the thought and focus.

I wonder if the second part of the gospel today gives some further insight. Jesus talking about light coming into the darkness. I am intrigued by this and have thought that darkness has its place because for me that is the time for deep questions and creativity. Also, I have thought the way of forgiveness and change is for us to bring the parts of ourselves we did not like into the light of Christ. That God would honour our wish and not come into the darkness of our heart of hearts to make any changes without our permission.

Then I came upon a part of Psalm 139. Verse 11.

*Darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day; * darkness and light to you are both alike.*

Therefore, there is light in the darkness already, and therefore we don't bring the parts of ourselves into the light, but welcoming God in Christ into the dark depths of our hearts.

This suggests that in the depths of our heart is both darkness and light.

This brings up the possibility of not being afraid of the dark around us and within us because there is the light of Christ there too. And maybe this is what faith and belief in God brings to us, the chance to see the whole picture. Those without belief in God can see it too, but with faith and hope we can feel and understand that there is light even in the darkest places of our lives.

This brings up the question; if God is light in the darkness, Hell would be the darkest place but there would there still be light there? The Light of Christ. And Hell may not be so much a place as a state of mind. Imagine those who don't believe in God or worse, actually acted against God in terrible ways. Being stuck in eternity with one's worst enemy.

And part of the best-known Psalm:

You prepare a table before me in the presence of those who trouble me, or in the presence of my enemies.

This would be Hell until I was able to make peace.

I guess what I am thinking is that God never gives up on us. And that we are in our spiritual journey moving closer and closer to salvation and a better relationship with God and others. And maybe this journey, if not completed, (and who's isn't?) the journey continues in the next life.

The good news is, that we don't have to get it right immediately, but there is also the idea that it is better to start now than wait until the end.

And the light in the darkness begins now and continues to spread over time. We often bemoan the lack of children and young families in church. There is an excuse....

Reginald Bibby, a Sociologist has said that it is only by the age of 50 approximately, that people begin to seriously consider their own mortality, so before that the focus is on family and education and careers and sports activities.

I believe we have something to offer those of all ages. The sense of relationship with God and each other in ways the world does not. That we are about community not competition. And that we offer or can offer activities and purpose beyond ourselves. The sense of meaning for both the community and the individuals and their families.

Amen.

May the path that you walk
be ever guided by justice and light
By the truth that you stand.
May it show, into the land.
May the words of Christ
disturb you all your life.
The road you've chosen is not easy
- yet here you stand!
(from the song, The Path, by Jason Mann, adapted)