

Sermon - St George's Anglican Church, Travancore Lent 2 Year A, Sunday March 8, 2020

Genesis 12:1-4; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-17; John 3:1-17

We are led by our readings today to reflect upon various aspects of our faith; upon what we believe. Abraham believed that God would deliver on the promise that was given and the story bore out the rightness of that judgement on Abraham's part; it all came true just as God said!

Paul explores in a complex manner the relationship between belief and love and, as I have promised in other parishes, I may look at the interesting issues raised in the Genesis reading and Paul's letter when these readings pop up again in 2023.

I would note at this point that Paul uses the example of Abraham's great faith as a starting point for his teaching on faith and on the access that everyone, Jewish and Gentile alike, has to salvation if only they have faith. I will return to this theme, by a different road, shortly, but before I do, I want to say a little about Nicodemus and his nocturnal visit to Jesus.

Nicodemus asks, *"How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"* In asking his question this way, Nicodemus is falling into a trap that is, unfortunately too prevalent today and was identified by the American biblical scholar, Kenneth Louis, about a decade ago – he is taking what is meant to be metaphor and trying to understand it technologically, almost mechanically. This is no way to understand divine revelation of the sort that we find in this passage from John's Gospel. A question which arises out of this tendency to perceive revelation as technology is, as Bishop David Warner of Chichester asked a few years ago in an article on this passage from John's Gospel, *"Does [our way of relating to God] ever become mere technology, needing release in order to convict us afresh of the love of God?"* Has Nicodemus, indeed, lost sight of the love which generates the conviction of faith which is born in water and the Spirit? It is that Spirit-generated love which lies at the very centre of the faith our readings are highlighting for us this week? We need to be ever alert to the possibilities raised by these questions if we are to be lively witnesses to our faith in the world and in our community. The image of the "born again Christian" is one at which we often baulk when we attempt to witness to our faith; by drawing on Jesus' imagery and his teaching of Nicodemus, I think we can avoid the simplistic and unhelpful awkwardness the modern "born again" image presents us with.

Now, let us consider that last two verses of our Gospel reading.

"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." As I have said before here at St George's, John 3:16 is, quite distractingly, almost a mantra for certain groups of Christians. This is not surprising because the verse contains an important central truth of our Christian faith. But note that it is *a* central truth, not *the* central truth of our faith. A problem arises though, when this powerful verse is paraphrased so that it is heard as *"God gave his only Son so that we may have eternal life."* This is not an untrue paraphrase; it just leaves out two things – two things which I believe are central to what the Gospel is saying.

The first of these is: *"God so loved the world ..."* God didn't give his son because we deserved it, because he felt like it, because he thought it might be fun ... No! God did this sacrificial thing because God loved the world *in such a way* that there was really no other course of action open to God. The coming into the world of Jesus, the Christ, was an act of love, and the death of Jesus to break the power of death was equally an act of great love on God's part. So we have been released from death's domination by God's great love for the world. And it's important to note that it was God's love for the world that prompted this gift of grace, not God's love for the people of Israel, great as that is shown by Scripture to be, and not God's love for Christians either, but God's love for the world.

That brings us to the second point that is, disastrously, ignored when we paraphrase the 16th verse of the 3rd chapter of John's Gospel:

God so loved the world (note the Greek translates "so loved" best as "loved in such a way") that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believed in him may have eternal life.

It is that "everyone" that is critical here. Jesus did not become human, was not *given*, so that people like us may have eternal life, or white people or black people, or straight people, or Essendon supporters, or Labor voters or any other exclusive group to which any of us may or may not belong! No! Jesus was given, given to suffering and death on the cross so that *everyone* who believes in him may have eternal life. Straight people cannot say that gay people who believe in Jesus cannot have eternal life any more than brown-eyed people can say that the minority blue-eyed people who believe in Jesus are precluded from eternal life. If we take this verse seriously the first exclusion is just as outrageous, just as illogical, just as unloving as the second.

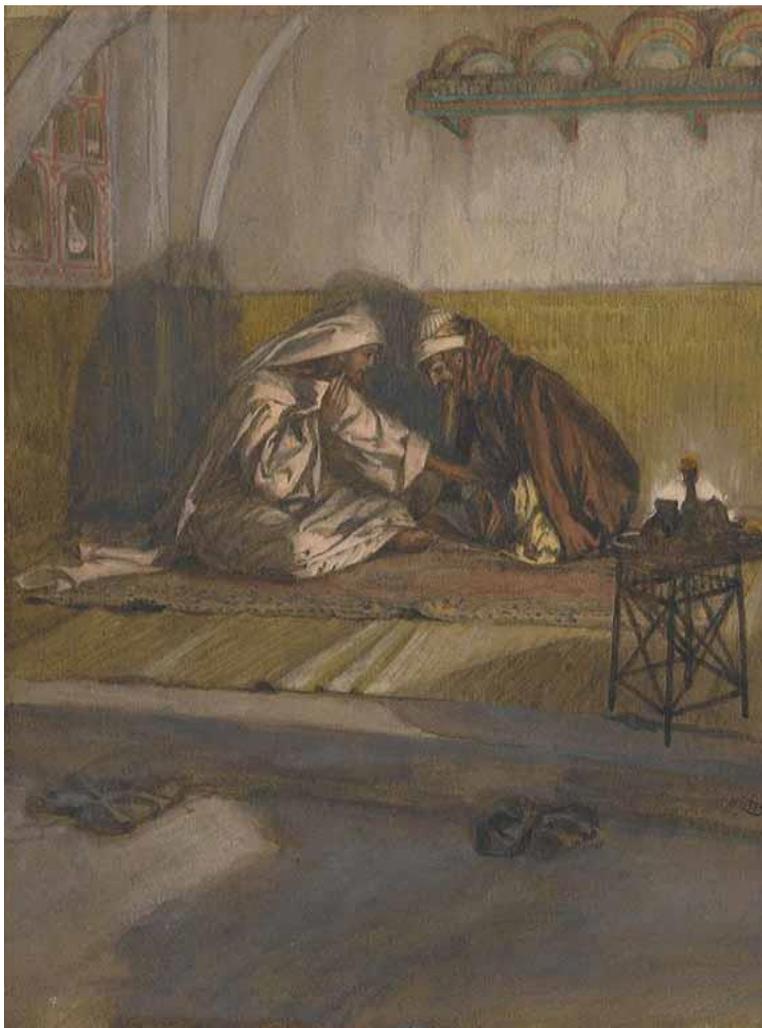
As an important note on which to end this sermon, let us not forget the 17th verse of the reading:

God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

It is very well to remember, particularly in these times, that God is not intent on punishing the world, but on overcoming the things which are born through hate and greed. Jesus came into the world, as a human, to save the human world, not to condemn it.

May God's great love for the world help us to continue our holy and reflective Lenten observance. Amen

Richard Murray 4 - 6 March 2020



Christ & Nicodemus – Tissot, James, 1836-1902