

Sermon on John 3: 1-17
No Condemnation Now I Dread

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

For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

No condemnation, no fear, in Jesus.

As he lay dying, Ambrose of Milan, the great 4th C bishop and mentor to Augustine is said to have said:

My life has not been such that I would need to be ashamed to go on living among you. Nevertheless, I do not fear to die. We have a good Father.

Late in the 18th Century as John Wesley, father of Methodism, lay dying some of his last words were: *Best of all, God is with us.*

As we journey through Lent, Jesus lies dying before us.

Step by step, day by day, week by week, encounter by encounter, until finally the cross looms on Golgotha.

He is dying one moment at a time. But in his dying he tells us, he shows us, about the love of God for the whole world.

No condemnation, only love. 'We have a good Father.', he tells us, 'Best of all, he is with us. He is with you.'

Love, given and received, engenders a radical openness.

It engenders an openness to God, to others, and also an openness to ourselves.

In order to love we must imagine ourselves differently to the way we are.

None of us, having entered into a context of love will remain the same.

Love shared in a mutuality of being whether in a church family, or a marriage, or with friends, changes us.

We learn to see ourselves through the lens of a love that comes from beyond us, and the more we look in this way the more surprises we might find.

Just imagine the shock the leper must have felt as he was not only engaged by Jesus, but healed. Loved into a different life. Seen with a different lens.

Hang on, I'm an outcast. That's who I am. An untouchable. You're not telling me that can change, Jesus? No, says Jesus, not it can change, it *has* changed. You have changed.

Jesus says to Nicodemus – you must be born again. Nicodemus is confused.

How can that happen? Can a man re-enter his mother's womb?

Yet Jesus is seeing deeper. Calling deeper. This is a kind of re-birth Nicodemus can scarcely imagine.

He is the teacher of Israel, steeped in all the ways of the Hebrew religion, and Jesus comes along and says, there is more here.

More to you. More to life. Look again. Look at yourself again.

God's love is opening up a new way; in you, in the world.

The Spirit is blowing and it blows where it will. **'Love is generated', writes Rowan Williams, 'by being loved.'**¹

Or as John's first epistle says, words we rehearse at every baptism, we love because God first loved us.

Perhaps the most significant opening up love creates, is our openness to love God and others freely.

It draws us out from being closed off, guarded, privatised, suspicious into a whole new realm of freedom. We are born anew.

But this is a hard business, as we saw with Nicodemus.

Did love change him, was he born again? Did he come to see himself as Jesus did?

The Gospel leaves it tantalisingly open, like lots of things. What about for you?

¹ Rowan Williams, (2016), *Being Disciples: Essentials of the Christian Life*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI; p33.

Has love changed you? Are you open to God's love asking you to see yourself differently, and the world? To be born again?

The phrase 'born again Christian' and the history that sits behind it has given it an unfortunately negative connotation.

But really to be born again simply means being open to the love of God changing you.

Letting it break down your barriers, your pretensions, your, illusions.

Letting it make you into a person perhaps you can't imagine yet.

Letting the possibilities of a life of compassion and delight really unfold in your life.

There is more of you to come, more to be discovered and revealed.

Poor old Nicodemus is pretty self conscious.

He comes at night. He's hedging his bets, testing out this prophet who does the amazing signs. He's confused and sceptical.

It's a hard business and confusing. But, he's there. He's taken the first step.

There's a flame burning down within him somewhere, a kind of low ember of expectation that is itching to be fanned into flames.

He wants to be born again, even though he can scarcely know what that means.

Yet there is an impulse. A longing. And Jesus doesn't condemn him, he talks to him, quietly, frankly, openly, willing him to change.

It would be lovely if we could say that this was always how the church has treated those grappling with life and faith; those who have come by night, perhaps with only a low flame of imagining burning in their hearts.

Sadly, that's not been the case. We are called to be the community of love and yet somehow we've been better at condemnation.

Now I am the last person who will say doctrine doesn't matter, we need to know what we believe and why. There are limits.

The postmodern assumption that one opinion is as good as the next is not something the church should affirm.

But doctrine without love is simply rule keeping, and can quickly lead to dismissiveness and even condemnation.

Love, as Williams writes again, is about having a deep contemplative regard for the world. It's a lovely phrase, a deep contemplative regard.²

The openness to ourselves and others love engenders is put to the test in all our humanly interactions, but especially when we encounter people who think differently to us, who perhaps are difficult, who perhaps grate on us, who perhaps struggle to understand.

These are the times when the Christ in Christian is most especially relevant.

God's openness of love in Jesus knows no bounds.

Jesus dies for Nicodemus as much as he does for Peter.

He dies for those at the foot of the cross who mocked and hurled insults as much as he does for the repentant thief.

He dies for the casually indifferent as much as the devout believer.

He dies for Pilate as much as he does for Paul.

No condemnation, only arms wide open. God so loved the world that he sent his only son.

If we are to walk in his way our deep contemplative regard must likewise be for all, the searcher as well as the lifelong follower.

The manipulators as well as the generous, the anxious as well as the calm.

We, none of us, have any right to imagine we have a greater stake in faith, in God, in the church as anyone else.

It is not ours to own, it always belongs to God, and God is love, all the time.

Even our own lives are not our own, they belong to God. I am not my own Calvin says, for I am yours in all things.

² Ibid.

Our very lives are sites of worth, and dignity and delight, out of which the love of God may flow as we are opened up to who we have really been made to be.

We're right there in the room with Nicodemus grappling with who Jesus is and who we are, searching for salvation and life and love.

John 3:16 has been perhaps the most beloved verse in the Bible for countless Christians.

But perhaps we'd do better always to remember it in conjunction with verse 17.

God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

In love there is no condemnation. No dismissal. No rejection.

Rather that's what Jesus opens himself up to such is God's love for the whole world.

He takes the condemnation he would have had every right to assert, onto his own shoulders, and shoulders it for us.

And we are rightly shocked at the openness of God.

Yet that shock gives way to delight as we come to see ourselves, others, and the whole world through the eyes of Jesus who loves us and gave himself for us.

As he lies dying, so we find our life.

So that when we come to die, we may receive his.

No condemnation now I dread, Jesus and all in him is mine.

We do indeed have a great Father, and best of all he is with us in Jesus' name.

Amen.