

The Fourth Sunday of Lent 2018
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John 3.16

I have spent the last three days at a clergy conference in the cathedral precinct at Canterbury. Sadly, I was not blessed with the gift of waking up and opening my curtains to reveal the monumental Romanesque glory of the stonework, as we were accommodated in the rather less glamorous surroundings of a Premier Inn. But we did start each morning with a mass in the ancient beauty of the cathedral crypt, and spent our days working and learning in modern buildings only yards away from the mother church of Anglicanism. At most of the moments when we were sent away to think on our own, I was able to slip back into the cathedral, and sit in silent prayer and reflection before the site of the martyrdom of St Thomas. It was a rare privilege.

Another privilege was meeting many clergy colleagues from varying dioceses and ministries. Our situations

and backgrounds were very different, but of course we also had things in common. It was a bit like starting university – where are you from, what subject are you doing, etc etc. Our questions eventually got to the elephant in the conversational room. Have you written your sermon for Sunday? It was a significant question, because the content of the conference was rather full on, and there was certainly no time to write while we were there. In my case, the answer was No. There was, however, a But to follow. Two buts, in fact. The first was, No but I have composed it in my head, and just need to write it down. And the second was, the text is John 3.16, and if a priest hasn't got anything to say about that, he's probably in the wrong job.

“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” I recently mentioned how much I had been enjoying celebrating Holy Communion according to the Book of Common Prayer at our neighbours St Michael's. One of the things I enjoy which I shouldn't,

is showing off how well I know the text. In the distant past, St Michael's would have viewed St Mary Magdalen's with suspicion, dangerous crypto-Papists, threatening with our ritual the good old Church of England and its good old Book of Common Prayer. And so, when it comes to the comfortable words, the scriptural quotations which follow the absolution and assure us of divine forgiveness of our sins, I like to look up, and make it clear that I know them by heart.

Hear what comfortable words our Saviour Christ saith unto all that truly turn to him.

Come unto me all that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you.

So God loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

I could go on, but the liturgy gives us more than enough showing off.

So God loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son. That's the Prayer Book version. So God loved the world. The problem for me, as a child in the 1970s, was that I wasn't yet too familiar with the ins and outs of 17th century English syntax. The intensifying adverb

“So” was at the beginning of the sentence. That didn’t work for me, and instead of “So God loved the world”, week by week throughout my childhood, I heard “So, God loved the world”. So. In consequence. So. Therefore, or because of this. So. If you hear it that way, it is then easy to turn the word “that” into the word “and”. After all, you are a small child, the vicar is a long way away, you can’t hear him clearly – and he had a Welsh accent, I might add. I was left with “So, God loved the world, and he gave his only begotten Son”.

Believe it or not, there is much of theological significance in this mistake. If I understand the gospel to be saying “Therefore, God loved the world”, I am implying something like a decision on God’s part because of something that has happened. God looked at the world, weighed up a number of options, and decided to love it. So, God loved the world. What’s wrong with that, you might ask. Almost everything, I might answer.

We cannot begin to get this God business right if we are determined to think of God as pretty much like us, only better. So, God loved the world. God might have done this or that, but he decided to love the world, because he's God and God does the right thing. In the forthright words of Freddie Mercury, No, no, no, no, no, no, no. God is not like us. God does not decide to love, the way we analyse a person and decide whether or not we are going to offer them charity or affection. God does not decide to love. God is love. Nothing else. Nothing more, for what could possibly be more? God is love. So God loved the world, that is to say, "God loved the world so much".

You see, if God decided to love the world, that rather implies the existence of the world is unconnected with the fact that God loves it. But the opposite is the case. The existence of the world is only possible, because God loves it. To say that God creates the world is a consequence of saying that God loves the world, for

love is what God is and only the love of God brings something from nothing, only the love of God is in that sense truly creative.

This is more than an argument in philosophical theology. The point to labour, is that there is no talk of God which is not talk of love. We who say we believe in God, we who gather together to worship God, we who say our prayers in an attempt to respond to God, we are those who are committing ourselves to love, whether we like it or not.

Talk of God is talk of love. And so the Fourth Gospel expresses this in the only way it knows how – to tell us that the God who is love is so completely given to the other that he does the thing we humans cannot imagine – he gives up his only son, his beloved child – for the sake of that which he loves. But again, this is not God suddenly deciding to be loving. This is God, poured out in love to all eternity, uniting that life, that love, to the human world in order to unite us to

himself, to draw us into the love we cannot understand, to drown us in the ocean of self-giving so that our only breath, our only life, is the giving of love which is God himself. There is no talk of God which is not talk of love.