

Sermon for Mattins on the Third Sunday after Epiphany, 21st January 2018

John 3:16 - God so loved the world ...

If you volunteer to join the transport department of Cobham Area Foodbank, as a driver of our splendid 3.5t Mercedes-Benz Sprinter, or as one of the all-important suppliers of muscle as driver's mates, you will encounter a little Bible quiz on your first run.

As you will know, most of the churches in Cobham, Stoke D'Abernon, Oxshott, Effingham and the Horsleys have a green collecting bin for people to put donations of food in. We've got one at the back here in the church, and we also have another bin in St Mary's Hall, so that the yoga ladies, who often seem to have bought too much food for their svelte figures, can generously give some to the Foodbank. It's a productive bin!

And the van goes round on Mondays and Wednesdays, emptying the bins and bringing the food which has been given, to our warehouse, where it is sorted by date and type, and meticulously logged into our database.

Now when the van gets to St Andrew's in Oxshott, our crew don't usually empty their bin, because it will already have been done. The donations in Oxshott go into a sort of garden shed in the children's playground at the back of the church. It's all kept locked with a brass padlock. The quiz for a new driver's mate is to guess the combination of the padlock. 'Three digits - the most famous verse in the Bible!' Do you get it?

Well, it's 316, John 3:16, Chapter 3, verse 16. 'God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life'. Our second lesson today.

It's a ringing statement, a trenchant way to spell out the heart of our Christian faith. But it's not really that simple. There are at least two big theological conundrums in this simple little sentence, which I'll try to sketch out for you, so you can sort them out over your roast beef in half an hour or so.

The first is the question what it is to be God's 'only begotten Son'. You'll immediately remember the words of the Nicene Creed - that's the one we say at Holy Communion, not the simpler, Apostles' Creed which we say at Mattins and Evensong. The Nicene Creed says, 'I believe ... in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, Begotten of his Father before all worlds, ... Begotten, not made, Being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.'

There was a big controversy in the early church, in the fourth century, 300 and something, centred around a scholar, a theologian in Alexandria, called Arius. Arius said he couldn't make sense of the relationship between God and his Son. If Jesus was God's Son, he must have been in some way created by God. But if 'begotten, not made' ... 'before all worlds' is to mean something, it implies that Jesus came after God, and was created, in Arius' argument, created by God. Jesus therefore was not actually God, because God is the creator, and Jesus was created.

By the way, before your brain hurts too much with this, let me just point out as well, that, as the celebrated Oxford philosopher of religion Richard Swinburne has pointed out, logically for God to be the creator of all things must mean, creator of all things *except Himself*.

So, was Jesus - is Jesus - God or not? If He was God's Son? Arius was also influenced by his knowledge of the philosophy of Plato, who thought of God as being eternal and beyond what we can know, unknowable. But we know about God from what we read in the Gospels: or rather, we know about Jesus. And of course, in John 12:45, Jesus is portrayed as saying, '... he that seeth me seeth him that sent me'. This must mean that Jesus is in some sense different from the supreme God, the God who is one, one God.

The Roman emperor Constantine, the one who helped the spread of Christianity by adopting it as the official religion of the Roman Empire, tried to solve the puzzle - which had turned into a hot debate within various factions in the early church - by convening a Council of church leaders, bishops and theologians, in the city of Nicaea. Constantine himself took the chair, and he 'fixed' the problem by adopting the description of Jesus as 'being of one substance' with the Father. It was at the Council of Nicaea, which took place in 325, that the Nicene Creed was drawn up.

This problem of how to understand the nature of God, and the relation between God and Jesus, extended also to the Holy Ghost, the Holy Spirit, the third member of the Holy Trinity which Together made up the Godhead, the divine nature. Again, it needed not to have been created, if it was really God. Of course in the Bible, at Pentecost, God is said to have 'sent' the Holy Spirit. They hit on the idea that the Holy Spirit 'proceeded' from God. The original version of the Nicene Creed, which is the version still used by the Orthodox church, says, 'I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father'. That version is given as an alternative in Common Worship - you'll find it on page 140.

And that version, according to which the Holy Spirit 'proceeded' from the Father, lasted until 381, when St Augustine, Augustine of Hippo, added the word '*filioque*', Latin for 'and the Son', so that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father and the Son. That's the version which we use today. But the Greek and Russian Orthodox churches still omit the '*filioque*'.

That's our first puzzle. What is God like? What is the true nature of God, and how does Jesus and the Holy Spirit fit in? Martin Luther and the Reformers in the sixteenth century went back to that question, along with all the other fundamentals of doctrine that they put under the microscope. Perhaps I'll make that a second chapter in our look at what's called Christology.

You'll remember that I said that this famous little sentence, 'God so loved the world,..' and so on, contained at least two big conundrums. So let's just touch on the other one, and then I'll let you head for the roast beef.

The puzzle is, what sort of deal, what sort of bargain, is God supposed to have made when he 'gave' his Son, and - presumably in return - we could have eternal life? Who did He give his Son to? What sort of a deal was it?

One idea was the concept that we have in the phrase in the Comfortable Words: 'Hear also what St John saith. If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the propitiation for our sins.' Propitiation, making up for something. Jesus 'suffered for our sins'. It is a process which is called 'substitutionary atonement'. Jesus suffered punishment which we should have received instead.

Again, it is an idea which may not be right. Are we really saying that God is a cruel god, who would hurt his own son? That's completely contrary to our belief in God as the God of love.

And again, to whom is God 'giving' Jesus? Obviously, we know that the idea is one of sacrifice, giving away the sacrificial Lamb or scapegoat. But if you think about it, it really implies that God may not be the only power: there is an anti-power: could it be the Devil, even? Again, it doesn't square with everything else we believe. The Devil is surely just a handy metaphor, a logical construct; for every impulse there is an equal and opposite force, or something. Where are our physicists?

Well, I have a feeling that some of you may now be preparing an equal and opposite force in favour of lunch, so I'll stop. I just want you to be a bit challenged, to reflect on what we can work out about God, his Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost. I'm sure that, when I share the blessing with you, it will be a real blessing: what I'm not sure, and what we can, and must, talk about, is how it works, indeed how it works so well.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant