

Lent IV, 2024 8am

God so loved the world...

God so loved the world that He gave his only Son, Jesus Christ, so that all who would believe in him should not perish, but would have eternal life.

It has a good claim to be perhaps the single best known verse in the entire Bible. A one line summary of the Gospel. If you don't know it off by heart already, there's a good task for the rest of Lent: get that line rooted, deep down, in your heart, mind and soul.

For this morning, just a whistle stop tour round it, pointing out some of the highlights...

God so loved *the world*. Not, that is, just a sub-section of the world. Not Christians, not good people, not people like us – no, God so loved the world. The mean, the spiteful, the objectionable, the enemy. The oceans, the whales, the mountains, the trees: God so loved the world. It is his love that called the whole thing in existence, and which keeps it there. And so there is no bit of it that God's people can treat with disdain and contempt.

That he gave his only Son. People quite like the idea of God's love for the world. It's nice, cuddly, warm. What they sometimes shy away from is that love means the Cross. God does not just feel warm and gushy about the world, God breaks himself open for it. How precisely it works is the subject of much debate among theologians. But perhaps think of it this way. On the Cross, Jesus Christ, God made man, bursts open – is burst open, by nails and spear. He bursts open, and his love and life drench the world. Everyone, everything, soaked with the painful love of God.

That all who might believe in him should not perish, but might have eternal life. Take the last bit first, eternal life. What does that mean? Well, obviously, life that doesn't die, life which means that our physical death becomes just a beginning, just an entry into another life. And yes, that's true – but my goodness, it's only for starters. Eternal life means the life of God. It means all the goodness, all the beauty, all the power, all the splendour and holiness of God packed into you. It means you will be incomparably, unspeakably, gloriously changed, and yet, somehow, still you. As someone once put it, if you believe in Jesus Christ, you are but a shadow of your future self. If you believe in Jesus Christ, you are but a shadow of your future self. That's the Gospel. Not just that we go on and on after death, that we live for ever. As has been often observed, that might prove a bit boring. No, you cannot begin to imagine eternal life. You don't, now, have the right words and pictures for it in your heads. All we need to know, all we can know, it will be and be always, beyond our wildest dreams. Boredom will have no place there, simply joy that always feels new.

If you believe in Jesus Christ, you are but a shadow of your future self. If you believe. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that **all who believe** in him should not die, but should have eternal life. All who believe. Well, the question is obvious, isn't it. What about those who don't believe? Members of our own families, the people we love the most, and – let's not forget – most of the world's population. Most of the people who have ever lived and who ever will do not believe in Jesus Christ. Are we meant to think that they just perish?

Well, many Christians do think that. And that's partly why they have been so keen, throughout history, to spread the word, to ask people to believe, so that they might be saved. And lots of them have been very clear that if people *didn't* believe then, to say the very least, we couldn't have any confidence that they would share in eternal life. People who died without believing were, at best, for many Christians, headed for a very uncertain fate.

That's what lots of Christians believe. It's what much of the Bible suggests. It has a fair claim to be the mainstream Christian view. It is not my view. And usually I'm a bit shy of just telling you my view, because preaching is not about personal opinions, but the Gospel – and if the preacher finds themselves saying something different to what much of the Church thinks the Gospel is, he or she probably needs to be quiet and think again.

Not in this case, however.

And not just because my view is not *just* mine, but goes back a long, long way, and also has a good claim to be rooted in the teaching of the Bible.

No, the real reason for speaking is this goes right to the heart of the Gospel.

Because if we truly believe that God so loved the world, that God passionately, achingly, cross-shapedly loves everyone, *everyone*, with a love surpassing even that of a mother, then the idea that, at the end, he simply tosses most of them away is repellent.

Because if we believe that Jesus was God made man, and that his death was indeed the bursting open of God's love for the world, that on Calvary hill he drenched the world in his mercy – then to say that that great deed has so little actual effect seems ... odd.

Because this is *God* we're talking about. Is his love so small, his power so weak, that the vast majority of his children just die?

No, the Cross is *powerful*. God's self-giving works. It saves a world. As St. Paul puts it, 'as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.'

Now, that certainly leaves big questions, questions too big for this morning. Does *all* really mean *all*, without any exception at all? Is *everyone* saved? Good question. I don't think so, incidentally, but it is a really good question. And you are probably nearer being right thinking that everyone is, than that very few are. Another question: will people who die without knowing Jesus, know him afterwards? Is that when their 'believing' happens, if believing is important, like the Bible says? Don't know. Good question. Something like that must be true, I think.

But for this morning, pause the questions. Just focus on that great shining truth at the heart of it all.

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so you, and the world, should not perish, but should have eternal life. That you should have joy, should be joy, beyond imagining. That he made it happen, on his Cross.

To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.