

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

One of the distinguishing things of John's gospel, from which we've just heard, are several encounters that Jesus has with various people. The account of his meeting with the Pharisee that came by night, Nicodemus, is perhaps the most famous of them all. It has a certain enigmatic quality. It starts as a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, but at some point in the text, and it's not clear where, Nicodemus slips out of the scene, and it's not a conversation anymore, it becomes a commentary on the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. When they are engaged in conversation, they're talking to each other, but there's no real engagement of their minds. They kind of talk past each other. Actually, with my transatlantic experience, I'm pretty used to these kinds of conversations.

Soon after I met Laura, my lovely American wife, she bought a picture, and she brought it to the college to show us. She showed it to me and a friend. "Do you like it?" She said, proudly holding up the picture. "Oh, I do like the frame." Said my friend. "Yes, but what about the picture?" Said Laura excitedly. "It's very interesting." said my friend. At that point I had to jump in and intervene, because it was very clear to me as an Englishman that Laura and my friend were speaking the same language, but that wasn't the same thing as meaning that they shared an understanding. Laura hadn't picked up that my friend clearly hated the picture, but was just too polite to say so. So it is with Jesus and Nicodemus, they were talking the same language, but they weren't picking up on what each other meant.

Well, certainly Nicodemus wasn't understanding what Jesus was talking about, he just didn't get it. There's so much I could say about this conversation, it's such a rich passage, but I'm going to focus on just one verse: the verse that was the text of that beautiful anthem that we've just heard. Perhaps the most famous verse in the whole Bible, John 3:16. "For 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." A very famous verse, and actually it's not always very easy to preach on famous verses, because what new is there left to say? As I was reading this passage afresh this week, I noticed something that I had not seen before, which was the fact that this verse contains two pairs. Two sets of pairs. One to do with God, and one to do with us.

The first pair is that God so loved the world - that he gave. Secondly, whoever believes - has eternal life. To put it more shortly, the pairs are loving and giving, believing and life. One thing follows another, and we see that too in the Old Testament reading with the talk of Abraham. God called, Abraham followed, another pair. Let me say something about the first pair in John 3:16. God loves, and gives. God so loved the world that he gave. The first thing we can say about God is that he is love. It's a giving kind of love. I want to pick up something at this point that Rebecca was talking about on Wednesday evening. I know that many people here are enjoying the formation classes which she's put together, which are very good. She was talking about this on Wednesday evening, and she said that if we're to talk about God as love, then we need to be saying something about the Trinity, that central Christian idea that God is made up of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

God is love, because God is the relationship between the three persons of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It wasn't that God created the world so he'd have something to love. Because before all time, there was in God a kind of family, a community, a network of relationships that we call the Trinity between Father, Son, and Spirit existing in a perfect unity. God is love. The world was created to share in that love, it was not simply made to be the object of God's love. It's important to remember the Trinity in this context, as we remember that in Jesus, God gave of Himself. It's not that God so loved the world that he sent a very important person to sort it out. He gave of Himself in Jesus Christ. What we're talking about in this verse isn't delegation, but self-giving.

God loves with a giving kind of love. A note to the object of God's love: It's not his chosen people, it's not the faithful ones, it's not the ones who've been good, God loved the world. Cosmos is the Greek word that's used here. There's an unimaginable depth and scale to that divine love. It comes across in the words inscribed in an asylum by the unknown inmate who after he died these words were found scratched on the wall. "The love of God is greater far than tongue or pen can ever tell. It goes beyond the highest star and reaches to the lowest hell. The guilty pair bow down with care, God gave his son to win, his erring child he reconciled, and rescued from his sin. Could we with ink the ocean fill, and were the skies of parchment made, were every stalk on earth a quill, and every man a scribe by trade. To write the love of God above would drain the ocean dry, nor could the scroll contain the whole, though stretched from sky to sky."

God's love is enormous, it's without end. Saint Paul has his turn at describing it in Romans chapter eight. He writes, "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord." Note the word "us" in the middle of those verses. That love which is of an infinite, endless scale reaches to "us" as individuals gathered here. We're included in that divine, self-giving, all-encompassing love, expressed in the person of Jesus. God reaches out to us, He takes the initiative, He loves us. Not because we are lovable, but because He is love.

Let me move onto the second pair. How do we respond to God's love and generosity? We're called to believe and have life. Belief in the New Testament is focused on the person of Jesus Christ, it's believing in him that's important, and it's an active verb, believing is not passive. There's a famous story about the I think he was American, Blondin the tightrope walker who famously walked across Niagara Falls on a tightrope about 100 years ago. He famously didn't just walk across Niagara Falls on his tightrope; he stopped in the middle to cook some eggs on one occasion.

Another trick was to go across with a wheel barrow, and the crowds that were gathered there cheered as he brought the wheelbarrow back. He said, "Do you think I could put anybody in the barrow?" "Oh, yes!" They all said. You know what's coming next. "So who wants to get in the wheelbarrow?" Suddenly it all went quiet. But one person put their hand up. One person believed he could push the barrow to the other side. It was his mother. She got in, and she went across Niagara Falls too. Many thought Blondin could get from one side to the other, only one believed, and committed to the venture.

It's not hard to imagine Nicodemus as someone who couldn't get into Blondin's barrow, he was someone who struggled to take a step of faith. Nicodemus was a rationalist. Look at how he replies to Jesus saying that he must be born again. He says, "How can anyone be born after having grown old?" Why does he say that? Is it because he's stupid? No. He's a well versed, well-educated teacher, so we know that's not the case. Was he trying to make Jesus look stupid? I don't think so. He's clearly sympathetic to Jesus, and there's no one else there, so I don't think he's doing that. I think he answers like that simply because he doesn't get it. Nicodemus comes across in this passage as a pragmatist. He's a cautious literalist. He's preoccupied by what he knows is possible. The word can, appears

nine times in this text. Nicodemus can't get past what he knows can be done. That's where he gets stuck. Jesus is talking about heavenly things. Nicodemus recognizes the words, but just can't grasp what they mean. I think when Nicodemus asked Jesus how could a man be born when he is old, I think there's a wistfulness in his voice. He's saying it's necessary and it's desirable, but in my experience, it's impossible. It's not the desirability of being reborn that Nicodemus is questioning, it's simply the possibility. We don't know if he ever overcame this inability to believe. We don't know if he ever took a step of faith. He does appear a couple of times later in the gospels, but never as a believer, or a disciple. It's not clear if Nicodemus ever moved from being an admirer of Jesus, to a follower of Jesus. He was earnest and well meaning. He may well have lived a good and blameless life. He may not have found the new life in the spirit which Jesus is talking about in this passage.

God loves and gives. Whoever believes has life. The first of these pairs is a given. The second is variable. Let's seek to be more like Abraham than Nicodemus. When God called Abraham, he responded and followed. When we sense God calling us, when we feel the wind of the spirit blowing on us, may God give us the courage to step out in faith, and to be born into that wonderful new life that only He can bring.

Amen.