

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sometimes I puzzle over what the people who draw up the lectionary readings can be thinking in their choices of scriptural themes. This Sunday, for example, our passage is taken from the third chapter of John's gospel, but it is taken out of a longer passage which is entirely devoted to Jesus' meeting with Nicodemus. So, I am not sure how we are supposed to interpret 1/3 of a longer and more unified segment of scripture. It's critical to know the context of any passage in the Bible to fully comprehend its meaning. John's chapter 3 verses 1-21 is concerned exclusively with the meeting between Nicodemus and Jesus. On Lent IV in Year B we read verses 1-17, whereas in Year B (this lectionary year) we read only verses 14-21. When verses 14-21 are ripped out of context, we're left with a kind of puzzle which a congregation is unlikely to figure out on its own. But to write a sermon on just the final 8 verses of a 21-verse segment can be pretty challenging.

Nevertheless, I want you to know that these verses are part of that famous interchange with Nicodemus. Why is that important? Because if we don't know to whom these verses are addressed, we've lost so much of the context as to make the verses more puzzling than understandable. So, who is Nicodemus? Well, as one scholar puts it, "one is not sure how to understand (the man). He is, on the one hand, a leading member of the Jewish council that ultimately has Jesus arrested and killed. On the other hand, it appears that he is somewhat open to Jesus, as the dialogue with Jesus and the dispute with the Pharisees seem to indicate. It is too much to call him a secret disciple, but the portrayal of Nicodemus, suggests that even leaders of the Jews might have remained somewhat open to Jesus." Which happens also to be a very good reason to use caution in understanding what John means when he uses the expression "the Jews."

It is only in responding to Nicodemus's misunderstanding about having to be born again in order to enter the kingdom of God that Jesus introduces some theology that must have been mystifying to the man. But that's the part of the passage we're supposed to figure out on Lent IV in 2021. You know, the part about Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness, Jesus being lifted up on the cross, and the promise of eternal life. And so on. And including perhaps the most famous line in the New Testament --- John 3: 16. And most of this would have been beyond the understanding of this mysterious man who visits Jesus at night to avoid being seen with a traveling preacher who is viewed as a heretic by many of his compatriots.

And underlying all of this, there is the knotty issue of just who the Pharisees were and how they are treated in the gospel accounts. Mostly, we get a very distorted view of them from the evangelists. We know that the Pharisees favored strict observance of Torah, but if we don't know that this call for increased Torah piety was also a call to "nationalist resistance" to foreign occupation by Rome, we miss a good part of what these people were all about. They were using their own genuine religious sensibilities to fend off Roman intrusion into Jewish life. These people we are used to deriding for their hypocrisy were in fact patriots and protectors of the heritage that defined them as a people.

By the time John had written his gospel, the other major party, the *Sadducees* had been swept from power. They differed markedly from the Pharisees in that they only believed in the books of Moses (that is, only the first five books of the Old Testament) as their scriptural canon and were therefore not

looking for a messiah. By contrast, the Pharisees very much expected a messiah, but the one they had in mind did not conform with what Jesus represented. It was the Pharisees, however, who were struggling for control within Judaism by the time John's gospel was composed. They were in such serious disagreement with the bulk of practicing Jews at the time that they were barring the followers of Jesus from worshiping in their synagogues. So, how it was that Nicodemus was seeking the counsel of Jesus at the very time his compatriots were kicking the Jesus believers to the curb is incongruous.

But the rest of the passage actually makes clear that the Pharisees would have been shocked to find that the Jesus followers conceived of God as having a plan for *everyone to come to salvation* and that the entire cosmos was being redeemed through him. As the Messiah of the Jewish people, how could this be so? Questions of this kind made communication between Jesus and any audience extremely difficult.

In today's reading, we have a theological statement which is complex and would have sounded quite foreign to any Jewish audience at the time of the ministry of Jesus. First, there is the portion about Moses lifting up the serpent in the wilderness and the comparison of this with the idea that the Son of Man will likewise be lifted up. And the point of the "serpent on a pole" is to suggest that there are poisonous serpents on the ground and a way of avoiding them, whereas the human on a pole (that is, a cross) faces the problem of evil humans on the ground.

This is followed by an explanation of the origins and purpose of the Son of Man. God so loved the world that he sent his only son to humanity offering us eternal life. He did not send him to condemn the world but to save it. And so forth. Perhaps the most famous lines in the New Testament. And the least understood. Let me give you just one brief example of our misunderstanding. In translating from the Greek, scholars have presented us with the problem of misreading the role of the word "so" in the sentence. It is not the sense of "God loved the world *SO much that....*" but rather "God loved the world *in this way...*".

There appear to be contradictions here. God did not send his son to condemn the world but those who do not believe in him are condemned. There are believers and unbelievers, and the division between them is clear. There are those who live in the light and those who live in darkness, those who do evil and those who do good. What meaning are we to draw from these contrasts? Well, as it turns out, we need to know something about John's community in order to understand his message. Toward the end of the first century, John's community was living in a world entirely different from the one Jesus knew. The Jesus community in that world felt despised and excluded. In fact, they had been expelled from the synagogues because of their emphasis on the divinity of Jesus.

Thus, in John's gospel we find a "polarity between insiders and outsiders" and a sharp contrast between the Jesus community and the dominant culture. In John's gospel we find that "some of the sharpest criticism" is actually directed at those who believe in Jesus but who keep it secret out of fear of being identified with a hated minority. So, what we are discovering here in the third chapter of the Gospel according to St. John is "the experience of a minority group *defining itself* not only within the diversity of Judaism but also.....among the followers of Jesus" themselves. "

In this context, polemical language against the Jews and secret believers functioned to *affirm* the members of the minority” which was defining itself in order to survive. But “the purpose is *not* to exclude others, rather to support those who likely make difficult choices to belong.” So, the intent seems to have been to encourage those who were wavering in their faith. As a small minority, the Jesus group “did not have the power or influence to marginalize others or cause harm by excluding them.” To use strong language to encourage those who believed in Jesus but were afraid to make their faith public was appropriate and effective. We need to understand these things or the exchange between Jesus and Nicodemus either makes no sense *or* we draw very unfortunate conclusions from it.

For example, the idea that “everyone who believes in him may have eternal life (but) those who do not believe are condemned already” can be misused to make Christianity sound exclusive, unloving and unyielding, and that is precisely how this passage has frequently been used. Those who choose to do this, however, ignore the key phrase “*God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.*” Nicodemus, “a Pharisee, a leader used to privilege and entitlement needs to hear that *God loves the world.*” And “so do the disciples “which is why in the very next chapter Jesus then takes them to a small town in Samaria so that they can meet *who the world (actually) is.* Because the world may very well be the last place – and the last person on earth we *think* God would love.” Which is the opposite of what is true from a Biblical perspective. And that is the kind of “contextualization” we need to engage in if we are to truly understand scripture.

For God loved the world *in this way*, that he gave his only Son in order that the world might be saved through him.

That’s how I would like us to view the real meaning of the words used by Jesus in his exchange with Nicodemus. Loved and saved. Not excluded and condemned. That’s the God we worship.

Gracious Father, whose blessed Son Jesus Christ came down from heaven to be the true bread which gives light to the world, evermore give us this bread, that he may live in us, and we in him. Amen.

Sources

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