

March 12 – John 3. 16

I was thinking of asking you to sing this morning.

The way I learnt a good deal of the Bible and its teachings was through singing. I belonged to the Kings Own Bible Class and a good deal of our Sunday afternoon sessions revolved around singing CSSM Choruses. That was how that incredible verse, for me the most significant verse in the whole Bible, the kernel of the Gospel, John 3 16 became indelibly engraved into my subconscious. To the tune of the Londonderry Air, Danny Boy –

“For God so loved the world, I find it written,

In verse sixteen John’s Gospel chapter 3;

He sent his son, who was for sinners smitten

When nailed upon the cross at Calvary.

Such wondrous love it passes human knowledge,

For Jesus died that we might ever live;

Eternal life so none need ever perish;

This life to all believing souls he now will give.”

I recently found my mind wandering during a Service, just after we had said in the Creed that we believe that God is the creator of ‘all things, visible and invisible’. In recent years I’ve attended one or two talks by leading astro-scientists on the incredible nature of the universe and our utter insignificance in the greater scheme of things. I’ve heard of how vast our universe is, how incredible complex the development of galaxies and super galaxies, what aeons of time have passed while galaxy after galaxy has come into being and passed into oblivion. I’ve learnt of the possibility, likelihood even, of parallel universes, of limitless constant creation and development way beyond our observation or even our wildest imagination. The mind boggles. And I had just declared, along with many others and just as we will shortly, my belief that all this vastness is planned, has a purpose and is the product of the creative God of all things, seen and unseen.

How can one describe such a Being. What words in human language come to mind when we contemplate such a Being – would it not be words like omnipotent, majestic, awesome, almighty, vast, huge ? Whatever words or concepts might come into our minds, it would surely not contain the notion of ‘love’. That concept is only there because of our conditioning, our training and mind-forming through the

constant repetition of and immersion in the expressions of our Faith through Bible reading, through prayer and worship, through recital of creeds, through singing of hymns and choruses, whether to tunes like Danny Boy or through great choral works.

It is not our natural reaction to the vastness of creation and the utter insignificance of this pinprick of a planet, let alone the cosmic insignificance of human life.

And yet, it is our faith that the incredible, the unbelievable is actually true. That God – and all that that word can bring into mind – so loved the world – this world- that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. It is mind-bogglingly incredible. Yet we believe it.

The whole of that story of the visit at night of the leading Pharisee, Nicodemus, is a great nugget of story-telling – the mutual acknowledgements of respect for one another; the very Jewish nature of the conversation with its statement and counter-statement, the clearing of the decks of unnecessary controversy, the good humoured exchanges and the shared seriousness of theologies of salvation. We don't know where it took place or who else was present. Was the writer himself there and is that how he knew such detail? Was it his house? A little earlier in the gospel the writer has told us how two of the followers of John the Baptist had asked Jesus where he was staying and Jesus had said 'come and see' – but the author has not then given us any idea where that was! These are all delightfully intriguing details of what comes over as a personal eye-witness of and participant in these momentous events. Spend some time this Lent reading and re-reading some of these beautifully crafted stories.

But if I wanted you to go away with one thing from this morning's Gospel reading, it would be the sheer enormity of that statement in verse sixteen John's Gospel chapter three, that God so loved the world... Forget for the moment the theological questions the verse raises – why, if Jesus is God incarnate, as we will state later in our Creed, is he referred to as God's 'son'? What of those who don't 'believe in him'; are they, that vast majority of those who have ever lived. excluded from this not perishing and having eternal life? Does the one who is God of all creation somehow love and effectively save from some kind of perishing whatever life there may be on other planets in this or other universes? Were these momentous words actually spoken by Jesus or are they the reflective thoughts of the author inserted into the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus?

Important and tantalizing questions. But for the moment, never mind. Reflect on and try to take into your very being the amazing thought that God so loved the world that he gave... And the world this verse says he loves, of course, is not this geographical planet, it's the world of its people, human beings; it's you, and it's me.