

Lent 5
22/3/2015

Mark the Evangelist

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalm 51

John 3:16-21

This is how God loves

I bought a violin on Friday. Not that I can play the violin – yet. But, for reasons quite obscure to us, Coulton has wanted to learn the violin since he was about 3, and we figure that now is about the right time to start, and I’ve offered to learn with him as some encouragement along the way. Buying violins is not a straightforward thing. You have to talk to people who know something about them, research what is available, and where, and in what condition. You can learn all sorts of things via YouTube reviews of the instruments – what to look for, why it’s better if the instrument is professionally modified from its factory condition, and so on. In the case of my new violin – it came up on Thursday on Gumtree, and looked a pretty good deal. The problem was that it was in Geelong – amounting to probably a three hour return trip, all up. I contacted the chap offering it for sale, and he didn’t want to post it but would be happy if I arranged a courier. So I contacted a courier, and that wasn’t going to cost too much, so got back to the seller to arrange an electronic transfer and the courier pick up. It turned out he then needed to be in Melbourne on Friday, so I upped the offer a bit if he’d deliver it, which he did, and I have my violin. (Coulton doesn’t have his yet!)

Why am I telling you all this? Now that I’m a parent, it is becoming increasingly clear to me just how much parents do for their children, if everything is working the way that it should. Most of the time a child has no idea what is involved to make happen the things which make her life a happy one. But occasionally she’ll hear, especially if ingratitude is present, Mummy and Daddy loves you so much that is this what they have done for you. Of course, it is almost impossible that the child can understand what in fact has been done, but still it is the case: love does “so much”

Which brings us to today’s gospel reading – re-visited from last week – and the first verse in particular: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life”. This is one of *the* Christian texts: printed on T-shirts and bumper stickers and baseball caps, appearing on placards in crowds at major sporting events: it sits somewhere near the perceived *centre* of what needs to be said in evangelism.

“For God so loved...” Is the way to salvation the same kind of way as that by which a boy comes to learn the violin – that *so much* is done, which then has to be “believed” or received?

I want to propose this morning a reading of this verse rather different from the way in which the church has generally heard it, thinking through three crucial parts of the verse: first, the *so* which seems to carry most of the weight of emphasis (God *so* loved the world), then the *giving* of the Son and, finally, the *belief* we are to have in response to all this.

1. For God “so” loved the world.

It is difficult not to hear this as “so much” – so *much*, so *big*, was the love of God, that he gave the Son. In the background here is the love we have for our children and the

cost it would be to *us* to give *them* up in this way. (Perhaps also, the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac also sits behind this text). And yet even though this is the sense the English suggests, it is not what the Greek implies. In the Greek, the "so" is the first word in the sentence, giving it more the sense of "thus": Thus, or *this*, is the love of God: God gave the Son. The difference is subtle, but very important. If I say to Coulton – this is how much we love you, that we did all this that you might have a happy experience with the violin, his response might be, But couldn't you have got an even *better* violin with a bit more effort? The "so much" implies the possibility of even more – that God has paid enough – even more – than necessary, but not necessarily *everything*. Here the love of God is *quantified*, measured: *this* is how *much* God loves you; is it not impressive?

But if we read the clause as "*This* is the love of God" then we are not dealing with a *quantity* of love which might have been smaller or even bigger but the very content of love itself: love *is* the giving of the Son. We'll come back to this again in a bit.

2. *God gave the Son*

What then, of the second thing to note in the verse, the giving of the Son? In most Christian thinking, this touches upon the theme of sacrifice: God sacrifices the Son, trades the blood and life of the Son for the salvation of the world. This understanding is both dearly embraced by some Christians and abhorrently rejected by others. On the part of those who embrace it, there is in the background the "so much" understanding we've just be considering: God has sacrificed *even* his Son for us. On the part of those who reject this idea there is, among other things, horror at the idea of sacrifice itself, let alone of sacrificing a child (in this era of heightened sensitivity to the abuse of children). The idea of sacrifice is made all the more difficult in those understandings which insist that God *had* to sacrifice the Son: that there was some kind of "deep magic" which forced God's hand in this way (see an earlier sermon on this: [here](#)). It is difficult to overstate how thoroughly ingrained this way of thinking is in the way the church speaks about the saving work of Christ. Explaining why the New Testament speaks this way about the cross would take more time than we have now; suffice it to say, the "giving" of the Son is *not* a sacrifice, if by that we mean that it would *necessarily* work in the way religious sacrifices are normally thought to work, that somehow we or God met all the requirements and sinners are automatically sprung from judgement.

In what sense, then, does God "give the Son"? We can say that God "presents" the Son. This the love of God for the world: the Son. This is perhaps a little dense to be immediately clear, but it is the heart of the matter. For "the Son" is for us always the *crucified* one – not the "sacrificed one" – but the crucified one. Again, the difference might seem subtle but it is everything. To understand Jesus' cross as a sacrifice is to interpret it in terms of first century Jewish understandings of the ritual animal sacrifices in Temple, which makes perfect sense if you *are* a first century Jew. We today do not have – or rather, we do not acknowledge that we have – a corresponding system of sacrifice securing our religious and secular lives. And so, if we are to interpret the cross as a sacrifice, we have to become first century Jews before we can become Christians. This is what St Paul rejected in a different form when he denied that uncircumcised male Greeks needed to undergo the cut in order to become Christians.

Jesus cannot be for us "the sacrificed one" in the way he could be for those who first heard his story. But he can be for us "the crucified one", interpreted in a different way. Christians are so accustomed to the theory of an economy of salvation in which

something has to be sacrificed that it is difficult to apprehend the story in a different way. But there are other ways. The sacrifice interpretation requires that Jesus came *in order* to die – that this was what the Father who sent him required. But this is not the sense we get from John’s gospel. Here, Jesus comes precisely to *live* – to be Word made flesh, to be Life and Truth in all their fullness. Jesus *does* die, but not because it was somehow demanded by God. If anyone demands his death, it is *us*: contradicting Jesus’ purpose as the Way, the Truth and the Life. The religious authorities require that Jesus die because he threatens the peace and may invoke the wrath of the Romans (John 11.48-50, 18.14). The Roman governor Pilate, who initially tries to get Jesus off, finally also sees the political risk Jesus represents and decides that saving him is not worth the trouble (John 19.12f). And so Jesus is crucified, but not as a “sacrifice”; he dies because the capital-L Life he lived was too confronting, too threatening of human self-righteousness. On this reading, the Son – Jesus – is not given *to be* crucified; the crucified Son is what we are given. God says: Look at this. God asks, What, Why, How has this come to pass; what shall we say about it?

On the sacrificial reading, the un-crucified Jesus appears as a kind of currency in a sacrificial economy. The cross is a kind of “spending” of that currency: an exchange of Jesus’ life and blood for ours. The fundamental problem here is that we have to believe in this economy of salvation before we can believe in Jesus.

On the “presentation” reading – that God “presents” the crucified Son to us – we are back in the realms of last week’s reflection: that the cross symbolises something about our heart and the heart of God. John’s gospel is concerned with a “Word” – a Word enfleshed. This Word becomes what we are; the question is simply: what, actually, are we? At the end of his gospel John has the Roman governor Pilate present Jesus to an angry crowd with the words: Behold, the man. The sense is more, Behold: the Human Being. Here is the human being – his humanity and ours – and this is what is crucified. Jesus, then, dies not only (or even?) “for” us, but *as* us; it is *us* on the cross, our true humanity being broken by broken humanity.

This is too much to think through here, but it is the kind of thinking which springs forth if we allow that God’s love is not a divine Son given *for* us but a crucified Son given *to* us: a revelation which effects something rather than something effected which is then revealed.

3. *So that everyone who believes*

For the sake of finishing within a civil time frame, the third crucial aspect of this central Christian text: “so that everyone who believes in him may not perish.” What is this “belief”?

On the traditional reading, “believe” means here something like *assent* as the appropriate response, and receiving salvation in return. This is not unlike the case of little boys and their violins, where “believe” looks like taking up the bow and doing whatever it is you call what a little boy does with a violin: the “*so much*” of the gift received *requires* this response.

But on the alternative reading we’ve been unpacking, “believe” is quite a different thing altogether. This is the love of God: the Son. The crucified Son, and no other. The crucified humanity of the Word-made-human. Humanity brought to nothing by humanity. Here, “believe” means recognising ourselves in all dimensions of the story. It means seeing ourselves as the cause of the cross, and as the victim of the cross, and as

the beneficiaries of the cross. The giving of the Son is not a “buy-back” scheme; it is the revelation of God’s heart *for* us, and of us *as* God’s heart.

We noted in passing earlier that it is closer to the dynamic of God’s work through Jesus to say that God’s love *is* the giving of the Son, rather than is *shown* by the giving of the Son. This is the love of God: the Son, crucified, restored to life. The cross and the resurrection are God’s story, are God as love, and are given also to be our story.

To believe in this God is to receive this love as our own. It is to grow into a humanity formed after the likeness of Jesus, the Son. It is to *become* love, as the children of God, and to participate in God’s great work of love in the world.

This is not easy. We begin with this story as we might begin with a violin for the first time – barely possible to hold let alone to get anything like music from it. But the promise is that, in continuing to hear the story and to tell it, it will increasingly become part of us, as the instrument becomes part the musician, the one enabling the other to express, and to be.

Let us, then, open ourselves to become love as God is love, harmony to the song God sings, to our greater humanity and, what is the same thing, to God’s greater glory. By the grace of God. Amen.
