

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 22 MARCH 2009

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John 3: 14-21

“Moving Between Light and Life, Death and Darkness”

Introduction

John 3: 16, “For God so loved the world ...” is the most known and misunderstood and misused text in the New Testament. People use it as a magical code to define the essence of Christianity.

When my mother approached the church leaders of our congregation in the late 1960s to ask whether she should leave her extremely unhappy and destructive marriage they used this text. These conservative Protestant leaders advised her to stay and witness to the faith of God’s love for the world and her partner. Actually, they were using Paul’s personal advice to wives to stay with their non-Christian partners, and just added this verse to strengthen their argument.

Our family doctor advised her differently. He told her it was dangerous to her health to continue in the relationship, that it was destructive for us, her three children, and that she had the right to leave and claim half of the sale of the land.

Who understood what God’s love for the world meant? Those church leaders or the non-Christian doctor?

My mother took our doctor’s advice. In this choice, she found peace and happiness for the first time in her life. I had never seen her happier! And it actually jolted my father to change his own way of life.

Any act, which seeks the true well being of others, is favoured by God and thus understands and participates in God’s love for the world. This is the meaning of John 3: 21 which adds a needed qualification to verse 16: “But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God”.

1. Now this story raises a dilemma. Those sincere Christians who **believed** in Jesus as sent of God offered wrong and life-denying advice to a woman in desperate need. A non-Christian doctor who did not believe in Jesus openly **acted** as one who loved life and offered life-saving advice! One group, though **believing**, acted in darkness; the other, neither believing nor disbelieving, **acted** in the truth of the light! The Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels would have accepted our doctor as one who would be accepted by God!

For this reason, I totally disagree, for once, with the Uniting Church theologian William Loader when he writes, “Whatever our own solution to the issues of inclusion and exclusion, John’s gospel asks us to recognise that to reject the love and light and truth we see in Jesus is to choose death” (First thoughts on Year B). Sorry Bill, but I argue that you are misreading John’s Gospel. John is calling for both a **faith** in Jesus and recognition that “faith” may be expressed in a **practice** consistent with God’s love for the world, even when it does not make an orthodox profession of faith in Jesus.

2. I suggest that those Christian leaders, though being “in the light” by professing faith in Jesus are

actually “in the dark” when they provided destructive advice. Therefore, if we are truly aware of our human condition, we must confess that each of us, whether a person of any faith or a person without faith, we all live between darkness and light.

The same Christian community that offered my mother flawed advice offered me inconsistent advice when I was a teenager. “Look up at the cross”, they would say, “and if you have enough faith, repent sincerely, God will bless your life and you will have no problems.” But they struggled with their own human condition as much as I did. However, the social pressure to deny failure and humanness hindered awareness of ambiguity and real relationships.

Dan Clendenin notes this contradiction in the life of people who join religious orders. “After a lifetime pursuing moral virtue among monastic communities, in his *Conferences*, John Cassian (c. 360–435) wondered why monks who had renounced great wealth exhibited possessiveness over a needle, book or pen knife, or why a colleague flew into a rage at a dull stylus”.

A recent programme on ABC Radio National, *Following Mother Teresa*, shared the story of Collette Livermore, a former Sister in Mother Teresa’s Order. She left the Order because she was disillusioned when on occasions she experienced Mother Teresa’s authoritarian and inconsistent behaviour.

I am not surprised about the exhibition of possessiveness among monastic priests or the authoritarian manners of high-profile Christian leaders! Nor am I critical of them. My surprise is that we are surprised! I suggest that this is the case because we fear complexity, anxiety, envy, and human failing. It may be that we want to deny this so we can concentrate on the positive things. However, this only makes matters worse. These things just go underground – onto our back page - and bother us at a close distance.

Psychoanalysis and the human and social sciences remind us of the complex realities of human life. Freud used one model to describe the human person and their relationship to family and society in the following manner. Our conscious personality, the **ego**, is like a rider without reins, sitting on a powerful galloping horse, which is our **id** (the IT in German) or unregulated urges, and both are forced to follow the narrow road of the **superego**, or our unforgiving and relentless moral values shaped by family and society.

3. Our text offers us pictures of God who both wants life for all, Christians, people of other faiths, and people of no faith, and works together with us to bring light and life out of those places where we experience human darkness.

In the letter to the Ephesians, probably written by one of Paul’s followers, God’s goodness and generosity are described as being offered to us all as a gift. We are described as being created for good works: William Loader writes that we are “created to work well, to be in good working order”. (Eph 2: 10)

4. In the film *Feast of love*, Oscar is a young man who overcame huge obstacles such as heroin addiction, a mentally disturbed and abusive father, and found the love of his life, Chloe. They fall in love and marry and Chloe is expecting their baby when he dies from a heart attack, of a genetic heart disease. Harry Stevenson (played by Morgan Freeman), a man of mature years who has lost his own son from a heroin overdose, is devastated for the couple. The relentlessness of life, which breaks love apart, overwhelms him.

On the night of Oscar’s funeral, he goes out into the night of his neighbourhood and walks aimlessly.

He finds Bradley Smith, played by Greg Kinnear, sitting in the park with his dog.

Harry says achingly, "It was awful, wasn't it! Too sad! Unspeakable! God is either dead or he despises us."

Bradley, who has suffered two of his own disastrous relationships, replies: "You don't really believe that."

"Maybe", responds Harry. Harry continues: "I saw a remarkable thing just now. I wandered into the stadium and saw a young couple [in love]... And then I felt sorry for them. There is so much they don't know. Heartbreak they can't even imagine."

Bradley pats him on the back and replies: "Even if they knew, it wouldn't change anything."

Harry asks, "How so?"

Then Bradley informs him that Chloe knew that something might happen to Oscar. She had gone to a psychic lady who predicted the whole thing.

Harry responds: "She believed her?"

And then Bradley says: "Yes Harry, she did. And she didn't run away or crawl into a hole. She found them a house. She threw away her birth control and she married him. God does not hate us Harry. If God did, God would not have made our hearts so brave."

God never leaves any of us alone, never! And we are equipped for and accompanied on our complex journeys through life.