

Homily: Fourth Sunday of Lent 2021

Today's Gospel includes one of the most famous verses in the entire Bible: John, chapter 3, verse 16. Occasionally you may see "John 3:16" printed on posters, placards or T-shirts, or painted on a bridge over the motorway – such is its appeal. In case you are not familiar with it, here's what it says: "God loved the world so much that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not be lost, but may have eternal life."

I suppose the reason it's so often quoted is that it emphasises the love of God for us and His desire that we share eternal life with Him. And yet somehow I personally have never felt particularly moved by this verse – the passages of Scripture which tend to speak to me most strongly of God's love are the ones where Jesus shows great compassion and mercy to an individual He meets along the road of life. Perhaps it's because this verse speaks of God loving *the world*, rather than loving a particular person. Obviously, we're all part of the world, but somehow when the Lord speaks of the whole world, it's hard to grasp. When charities advertise for donations, they often pick out the story of a particular person who is suffering. It's because they know that we simply can't take in the scale of the suffering being felt; but when we hear of an individual, then it becomes real for us.

So maybe we can listen again to our Lord's words, and apply them to ourselves, to better take in what He is saying to us. Today Jesus tells us that "God sent in His Son into the world not to condemn the world, but so that through Him the world might be saved." But Jesus has not just come into *the world* – He has come into our lives, too. Through the gift of faith, in prayer, through His presence and grace in the sacraments, He has come into my life and your life. And so, echoing our Lord in today's Gospel, we can truthfully say this (and I mean these words for each and every one of you – the faces I see before me, everyone who participates via the livestream, all those who will read these words in print):

"God loved you so much that He gave His only Son, so that you who believe in Him may not be lost, but may have eternal life. For God sent His Son into your life not to condemn you, but so that through Him you might be saved."

And this is the truth. If you had been the only person in the whole of human history who needed salvation, Jesus would have come to earth, shared our human nature, lived, died and rose again just for you. The Good Shepherd always goes after the one missing sheep. I absolutely believe this, because I believe that the love of God for each of us, the love of Jesus for each one of us, knows no limits. When reread our Lord's words today in this light, they strike me much more powerfully. And it is truly mind-blowing to know that Jesus would do all this for me.

"The Son of Man must be lifted up", Jesus tells us today, so that everyone who believes may have eternal life in Him. This "lifting up" is Jesus being raised on the cross; it is His death. And yet it also points us to Jesus in glory. On Good Friday, as we see Jesus lifted up on the cross, we also hear of Him being lifted up in glory: "See, my servant will prosper; He shall be lifted up, exalted, rise to great heights." These are the words of the prophet Isaiah,

the opening words of the first reading we hear on the day of the Lord's death. Jesus is lifted up on the cross to show the depths of His love for each of us; and in the resurrection, He is lifted up in glory. But this victory is not just for Him: St Paul tells us today that God "raised us up" with Christ when we were dead through our sins. And so in Lent, in this season of repentance, of recognising our sins and seeking forgiveness, we have constantly before us the image of the cross: Jesus raised up, lifted up for our salvation. And we see His desire to raise us up to new life in Him.

I wonder to what extent we really make Him welcome in our lives. To what extent do we "lift up" the Lord in our minds and hearts, raising Him in our priorities, in our preferences, in our loves? Jesus says that it's by His being "lifted up" that we gain eternal life; and part of having faith, of believing, must be to let the Lord be the source and summit of everything we do. If we resist Him, maybe it's because we haven't quite yet accepted what He teaches today, so let's listen again: He does not come into your life to condemn you, but so that through Him you might be saved. Whenever we struggle to trust God's will, whenever we back off from Him because of our sins, whenever we feel we have to earn His approval, we need to be reminded of this truth.

And so today, I make this my prayer – and I invite you to pray it with me:

O Jesus, who came into my life not to condemn me, but so that I might be saved,
give me faith to believe and to trust You.

You loved me so much that You were lifted up on the cross so that I may have eternal life;
help me to believe in Your name and Your love.

Give me the grace of an ever deeper faith,

and grant that I may always prefer Your light to the darkness,

so that I may respond with love to that immeasurable love You have first shown to me.

Amen.

Fr Andrew

