

Morning Assembly

14th September, 2015



"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him."

John 3:16-17

John 3:16 is undoubtedly the most popular verse in the Bible. Many children and adults have memorized this verse in Sunday School, including me. That was actually the very first verse that I was asked to recite by my Sunday School teacher. This verse is so important that it is often referred to as the Bible in one sentence. In only 24 words, John 3:16 tells us what we need to know about the Gospel, the good news.

This passage is in fact preceded by an incident in which Nicodemus, a Pharisee, came to see Jesus. You see, Nicodemus was no ordinary Pharisee. He was someone of importance - a member of the Jewish ruling council. And if you can recall from your RS lessons, Pharisees, of course were no friends of Jesus. They always challenged Jesus with difficult questions, such as whether they should pay tax to Caesar and why Jesus was healing the sick on the Sabbath day. At one point, they even took a woman caught red-handed in adultery to Jesus and expected him to authorise her execution by stoning her to death. They always tried to test Jesus so that they had grounds to accuse him.

So picture this old man, this Pharisee, coming very secretly in the middle of the night to see Jesus. He was probably looking over his shoulder all the time just to make sure that no one was following him. He was supposed to be the authority in matters of the Law and he was too embarrassed for people to see him coming to ask Jesus questions. Yet, he had something that was bothering him so much that he had to see Jesus. When he saw Jesus, he said, "um... Rabbi (which means teacher), I know you are from God because no one can perform the signs that you are doing... so, er... Can you tell me er... how we can enter the Kingdom of God?"

Now, getting into heaven may not be a big deal to you. Getting into a degree course in HKU is perhaps a much more pressing concern. But you have to understand that for Nicodemus, a

Pharisee, this is everything. In fact, he spent his entire life studying and observing the Law of God just for this. That was his lifetime investment. He observed every minute detail of the Law fervently so that he could be saved.

How can I enter heaven? In fact this is not an uncommon question. When asked this question, people in Hong Kong often jokingly say, “Well, if you are a good person then you go to heaven. If you do a lot of wrong things then you end up in hell.” In other words, if you do good things, you will get one rung of the ladder and you are one step closer to heaven. If you do enough good things, you will have enough rungs of the ladder to get you into heaven.

Yet what did Jesus tell him? Jesus said, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.” Nicodemus was absolutely confused. “That is impossible! I am so old now. How can I go back into my mum’s womb and be born again?”

Then Jesus said, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” In other words, no one can do anything to earn a ticket into the kingdom of God. Jesus died on the cross as a sacrifice for the sin of man and salvation is given freely to whoever is willing to believe.

The grace of God, unmerited favour, given to us as a gift - this is a concept that is rather difficult to grasp. While I was racking my brain trying to find a story to illustrate the idea of grace, I suddenly came across the musical “Les Misérables”, which gives a very good illustration of the idea of grace. The musical is based on the novel by Victor Hugo. Jean Valjean is released after spending 19 years in prison for having stolen a loaf of bread from a local baker. He has been badly treated throughout these 19 years in prison and now he is hungry, cold and without anywhere to go. A bishop takes him in and provides him with food and a bed for the night. Sadly, out of greed, he steals all the silverware of the church and runs away. Here is Jean Valjean from the musical:

(film clip from Les Misérables)

Has Valjean done anything to deserve such forgiveness? No, definitely not. Yet the bishop forgives him unconditionally and even gives him the more expensive silver candlesticks, hoping that this would give him enough money to start him up as a gentleman. This act of forgiveness has completely transformed Valjean. This is a born again experience for him.

God's forgiveness even goes further. We do not walk free just like Valjean. We walk free but Jesus bears the punishment for us by dying on the Cross.

You may think that I am not as bad as Jean Valjean and I do not need the forgiveness of God. That is an answer that you have to find out from God. After all, Jesus said in the Gospel of Matthew, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick... For I have come not to call the righteous but sinners."

Yet the lesson is that God cares about you and He knows everything about you: your hopes, your desires, your dreams, your shortcomings, your darkest fears. If one day you realise that you need God's forgiveness, just remember that it has already been given to you freely as long as you believe that Jesus died on the cross for you and for your sins.

Yuen Dick Yan, Dennis

*Principal
St. Paul's College*