

## 6<sup>th</sup> September 2020 10 am The Heart of the Father for the World

Service led (and readings) by Lindsey Attwood, talk by Val Whiteman.

*This transcript is only of the readings, the talk, and the prayerful response.*

### Readings

[Lindsey:]

So the reading today is taken from a famous passage which is **John 3:16**.

<sup>16</sup> For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

And the second reading is taken from **2 Peter 3:9**.

<sup>9</sup> The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

### Talk

Father God, I really thank You for Val, and I just pray this morning that You would bless her she comes to speak to us. And I ask, Lord, that Your words would be through what she says. So just bless her as she comes to speak, Lord, in Your name. Amen.

[Val Whiteman:]

Amen. Thank you, Lindsey. It's such a privilege to be able to talk to you. I'm so looking forward to when we all go back into church, when we actually see one another. You realise what a gift it is to be able to be rooted in the community of the church, just by seeing people, so it would be wonderful to be back. But even if we're not, or as we're not, it's good to think about who God is.

Just take a step back for a minute and think about how we feel personally about the God we love. Lindsey's already talked to us about the kind of view we might have about God: the lawgiver, the provider, the creator-artist, the Father, the rescuer. And these are all really, really good things aren't they? They are aspects of God that are reflected in us as His creation. Sometimes though, we end up with a God who is smaller than what you might call the real God. And that's inevitable, because as human beings we can't always grasp the fullness of the God we worship.

The verse we've just been given comes from the story of Nicodemus: you remember, that famous story when Nicodemus, a respected teacher of the law, a rabbi, a well-trained man at the centre of things, sneaks to Jesus by night because he doesn't want it known that he needs to go and talk to an untrained rabbi from Galilee. It wouldn't be good: there would be a lot of loss of face. So he goes at night. And the story is so familiar to us, sometimes we kind-of miss the importance of it.

Jesus, then not exactly goes on the attack but He certainly challenges Nicodemus right from the start. "You don't understand," He says, and Nicodemus says, "No, I don't. How can people be born again for the second time?" he says. Things that we, as good Protestant people, have been trained from our youth-time upwards.

So, let's look back at what God has said during the whole of the Old Testament. Lindsey has shown, as I say, these definitions of God, that right from the beginning, God contacts Israel. He isn't a God who is created by Israel, not like the neighbouring gods, the gods of neighbouring countries. God comes into contact with Israel, and He says, "I will be your God." Every time Israel turns away, God is there, pursuing them. Even if, like the prodigal son, their

behaviour condemns them to servitude in a foreign country to exile, God is there, He challenges their view of Him, time and time and time again. And they break the covenant time and time and time again, as we know. But God, right from the beginning, says that God's love is wider than just Israel, His chosen people. Everyone is supposed to be blessed through Israel, the whole world. In Genesis 12, God says to Abraham,

<sup>2</sup> 'I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you;  
I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.

<sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse;

And this is the important bit:

and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'

Well, they had to wait for a while before that happened, but Nicodemus has come to meet the man through whom that's come to pass. Now Nicodemus is really well trained. He is a theological student beyond all theological students, and you'd think he'd understand. But before we think how silly he is, let's go back to *our* concepts of God.

When we come to Christ, first of all, we come bringing our own ideas about who God is, according to our own experiences with fathers, for instance, we build our own God. And that isn't wrong, because we're bringing to God what we have, which is what we're supposed to do. We give Him who we are. However, if we don't listen and study and experience, we get stuck in our own views, a bit like Nicodemus did. And we control God and not vice versa. In this passage from John 3, Jesus says the Spirit is like the wind. He's unexpected, moving in ways we can't imagine. And yet, time and time and time again, throughout the history of the church and throughout Israel's history, we've tried to box the Spirit in. We put God into the church. And we use Him to control people's behaviour, for instance. Think about how the Victorians did. If you remember *All Things Bright and Beautiful*, that children's hymn and the verse we don't sing any more,

The rich man in his castle,  
The poor man at his gate.  
God made them high and lowly,  
And ordered their estate.

Well, how convenient if you're rich and need servants, and how totally, utterly and absolutely opposed to the Gospel teaching! Remember, Paul said in Galatians [3:28], in Him ...

<sup>28</sup> There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

When I was growing up, there was a book which is called *Your God is Too Small*<sup>1</sup>. And that, I think, that says it all really: we inevitably create ourselves a manageable God who isn't going to upset us too much. We create one who will control undesirable elements in society, and who will make us feel better about ourselves, if we're not careful. And that's absolutely awful. As I said, we have to start where we are. But where we end up depends on how much we let God be God. And in a minute we'll think about how we might do that.

John 3:16 says, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son." To hear some Christians, you'd think John said, "God so hated the world", because they become so judgemental about people outside the church. Well, I'm really sorry, but we are loved as much, not more, but as much as God loves everyone. We are loved so much by God that He gave everything for us - He gave Himself. Nowhere in the world has there been an episode, an incident, a terrible happening that God has not been present in, and endured in the Cross, and we

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/34486.Your\\_God\\_is\\_Too\\_Small](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/34486.Your_God_is_Too_Small) by J.B. Phillips, first published 1952

need to remember that. In response, we bring everything to Him. And so if we listen to Him, we grow in wisdom and humility. And the offer to love God is an open one. The whole world is saved, not just people like us, and we cannot judge. That means that Paul says "The whole creation is groaning until its fulfilment," he says that in Romans [8:22],

And God's desire is for everyone to come to Him<sup>2</sup>, not just the Chosen Few. Lindsey read to us that passage from 2 Peter [ESV]:

<sup>9</sup> The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

He doesn't want anybody to be destroyed. He wants everyone to respond, to repent. Don't you think that's absolutely wonderful? And we are part of that story, because we as Christians who love what you might call the real God, the God who is 'I am', are His servants. And we become Christ in the world, which is a huge responsibility, as well as a great privilege, to share the love that God has for us with everybody. It's just an amazing thing: there can be nothing more exciting, nothing better to do. And incidentally, I find it interesting, if you look up **1** John 3:16 [the first letter from John; NIVUK], this is what you get:

<sup>16</sup> This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.

Now, John and the writer of 1 John couldn't have known the coincidence, because the Bible didn't get chapters and verses until much later, the 16th century for verses. So, that verse which links so nicely with John 3:16 is what you might call a God-incidence. "This is how we know what love is. Jesus Christ laid His life down for us, and we are called on to do the same for our brothers and sisters." And you will remember from scripture that 'our brothers and sisters' means basically the entire human race, not just the people we fancy liking.

We learn what the love of God is by living in trust with Him. So how do we do it? Well, we meet together during the week and we explore our different ideas of God. We read the Bible, we pray, especially we pray, and more especially, we listen to what God is saying to us. If you haven't done this recently then maybe start thinking about it. And if you're if you feel you're stuck with a 'less than God' God, then spend some time in the coming week, asking God to show you where you are with Him. Are you principally seeing Him as a judge, eager to send you down for punishment for every minor mistake you make? Is that your view of your fellow Christians? Or is He a doctor who pops along with a sticking plaster when you need it? Or a fireman you only call on in emergencies? Or is He like a spaceman abandoning Earth to float away somewhere out of reach? Challenge yourself: what sort of a God do you think you really worship, and ask God by listening to Him, to tell you the sort of God He actually is. The main way of finding out who God is, is to look at Jesus in the Gospel. Remember, God says He is 'I am'. He doesn't have a name invented by humans. So if we want to meet with the living God, we have to pray to give up our preconceptions and to let the Spirit blow where He wants. We have to get to know Jesus better, so that we will know the Father-heart of God in Christ. It's a lot more exciting than limiting yourself with a God who suits you. But it's a lot scarier too.

I want to end what I've said, and I know there's a lot more that I could say about the loving Father-heart of God, because it's just endless and infinite and wonderful, but I'd like to pray for all of us, with the words that Paul uses to the Ephesian church, and he's writing this right at the end of his life, when he thinks he's going to be killed imminently. So he says, [Ephesians 3:14-19; NIVUK]

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2 See also 1 Timothy 2:1-4

<sup>14</sup> For this reason I kneel before the Father, <sup>15</sup> from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. <sup>16</sup> I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, <sup>17</sup> so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, <sup>18</sup> may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, <sup>19</sup> and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Amen.

## ***Prayerful Response***

[Lindsey:]

Thank you, Val, for that. That was really, really good: so helpful. As always, when one speaks, it's always good to actually have a sort of response and just have a thought or a moment to think through what has been said. You see Val has been trying to say about what God is like, and actually, she mentions the talk with Nicodemus, and the idea of being born again. I know for many people the idea of being born again has many connotations with various types of Christians, but actually what it's saying is, you need to have a different way of seeing things: you can't just operate out of the flesh, you need the Spirit of God to help you see God. Val's so great at talking about what God is like, how much He loves us, and He wants us to enter into a trust relationship. So I just want a couple of minutes before we move on to intercessions by Jane, just to be still. If you're at home with your family or whatever, even if you're child, I just want you to just be still for a minute, close your eyes even, and just allow God to be close to you.

So Jesus we do pray that You do draw near to us, even when we're in our homes; we're not together in our building but You are with us and You are the one that unites all of us. I pray that we would see and understand that Your desire is to bless and bless and bless and bless, that You want to. You're so generous that You gave us Your Son. This is the type of God You are; this is the Father that Jesus prayed to.

Jesus, I pray that You would open our hearts and our eyes to see who You are: to really drink and see who You are. And I just pray, Lord Jesus, that we would, even those of us who struggle with faith or who struggled with things in the past or who are still struggling with what God is like, I just pray that You would allow Him to touch your heart, to show You what He's like, so that You can hold His hand, trusting Him, trusting He wants to bless and that through You He wants to bless others as well. His heart's desire is for all to see what He's like.

Holy Spirit, just please open our hearts and our eyes, that we would be willing to trust You, that You are good, that You are good and Your desire is to bless. I pray that this week we would all receive that and dwell on that, and eat on that. Feed us Lord with what You're like,  
In Jesus' Name. Amen.

[Transcribed by Hamish Blair with help from <https://otter.ai>]

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