



Lent 4, Year B – March 22, 2009

John 3.14-21

A Homily preached by the Rev'd Canon M. Ansley Tucker

In Austria, Josef Fritz incarcerates his daughter and the children of his incest in a soundproof underground vault for 24 years. In Kandahar, not one, not two, not three, but four Canadian soldiers are killed in one day by improvised explosive devices. In the United States, executives whose companies are feeding at the taxpayers' trough (aka "stimulus package") apparently imagined that said taxpayers would be happy to know that \$165M of said package would be parceled out to them in the form of bonuses. And in Calgary, not two blocks from where I live, a Good Samaritan is beaten unconscious when he tries to come to the aid of a convenience store employee.

This is our world. Violent, senseless, greedy, selfish, sick. And God so loved the world, this world — that he sent his only begotten Son.

Is it not remarkable that John does not say that God so despaired of the world, or that God so loathed the world, or that God was so angry with the world, or that God was so tired of the world...? He says that God so *loved* the world.

Probably most of us give intellectual assent to the proposition that God loves people, warts and all. But I am not so sure that we really believe it. Our prevailing picture of God is more likely to be that he favours the good guys, especially the ones who take the time every day to tell him how wonderful he is. We believe that God is truth, and beauty, and goodness, and that he must therefore have no truck with what is untrue, ugly, or bad. But that is not what John says. Rather, God so loved the world. God so loved what was untrue, ugly, and bad, that he sent his Son.

You see, you don't have to be a Christian for God to love you. You don't even have to be a good guy. What wins us the love of God is nothing more, nothing less than the fact that we are his handiwork, his creation. In the beginning, when God was alone, he created in order to have someone with whom to share his love. We understand this: Why do I wish I had another dog? — not simply because she will love *me*! Why do people have children? And just as a parent can never let go the parental instinct, just as a mother can never let go her mother-love, even when that love has been sorely tested, indeed, rejected, so God continues to love his own wayward creation, and to will the best for it. It is *love* which God bears toward this violent, senseless, greedy, selfish, sick world of ours.

Now, this indiscriminating love of God (once we really believe it) is likely to jar our sensibilities. It isn't so much that he loves the bad guys that bothers us. It is that he doesn't seem to love the good guys *more*. Often enough, someone will complain to me that life has mistreated him. That life is not fair. And it is true that there doesn't seem to be any preferential treatment for those who have declared themselves the friends of God. We are as likely to be crippled with arthritis, harassed by financial difficulties, deserted by our children, unappreciated, and hard done by, as anybody else. We say, Why me? And God says, Why not you? And what offends us is that this love of his seems to have wrought havoc with the principle of justice.

In fact, Jesus has turned Jewish religiosity and expectations upside down. The Jew understood God chiefly in terms of his justice, and discipleship in terms of keeping the Law. Love and mercy were also divine attributes, but they were made

subject to the demands of justice. So, if the Jews came ultimately to believe in the resurrection of the dead, it was only because they believed that justice had to be done sooner or later, and it was obvious that it wasn't always done sooner. The Saviour, the Messiah, was he who would at last establish a kingdom where justice prevailed.

Jesus says, God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. So far, so good. But then he goes on, shattering every expectation, and says, "For it was not to judge the world that God sent his Son into the world, but that through him, the world might be saved."

Here is the supreme irony. A community which has established justice over love, produces a Saviour whose function is not to judge, not to administer justice, but to save this wicked world from itself. The advent of Jesus Christ is the triumph of love and mercy over justice.

And here, I believe, is the only clue to making sense of unfair human suffering. When a woman complains that life is not fair, I am not sure that we can do anything but agree with her. For life is not fair. And I am unaware of any promise or statement which God has made to us suggesting that it is.

What I am aware of, is the fact that the whole Christian gospel, nothing less than our salvation and redemption is hinged upon two travesties of justice. The first, of course, is that we human beings should have been redeemed at all without payment, without punishment. What we have deserved is not what we have got. God has declared us worthy, friends, true children. And that is wonderful, but it isn't fair. And secondly, we see a man, "innocent, captive, taken unresisting, falsely accused and for us sinners sentenced" hanging on a tree. The very thing which redeems, which avails for our salvation, is itself the most heinous miscarriage of justice of all. Again, it is wonderful. But it is not fair.

Now, this yields us two insights which may be of some help in the face of unjust suffering. First, we are no longer compelled to prove that life really is fair if only you look at it the right way. We shall probably make a far better job of compassion if we are not quite so busy defending God. And secondly, precisely because something unfair has achieved our salvation for us, surely it is possible that God would continue to honour innocent suffering, and to use it for the mystery of redemption. Suffering is bearable so long as it has meaning — and we shall find that meaning not simply in the fact that Jesus suffered innocently, too, but in the fact that his innocent suffering made a difference.

This world of ours is violent, senseless, greedy, selfish, sick. And God has loved it. And we ourselves have been given to what is untrue, bad, and ugly. And God has loved us. It is only by the triumph of love and mercy over the relentless demands of judgment and justice that we have been saved. It is not fair. But it is wonderful.

May God give us grace to rejoice in the equality of his love, to let go our narcissistic expectation of special treatment, and to see the potential for grace and redemption in any suffering which bears the likeness of Christ's own. Amen.