

## **JOHN 3.16: AN INCREDIBLE GOD**

*[Chelmsford 29 November 2009]*

How many of you have at one time or another been avid readers of the *Guinness Book of Records*? It's a wonderful book full of all sorts of amazing but true facts

Did you know that

- the longest bout of hiccups has lasted 55 years? Indeed, according to my edition, the man is still hiccupping, his wife has left him (she can't stand the hiccups), & the poor man is unable to keep in his false teeth?
- the heaviest woman on record is the late Mrs Percy Pearl Washington - she weighed 62 stone 12 lbs?
- the greatest number of children produced by one mother was 89? In 27 confinements some poor Russian peasant gave birth to 16 pairs of twins, 7 sets of triplets, 4 sets of quads!

Thank God all these people are quite exceptional

- None of us is likely to endure such a fit of hiccups
- None of us is ever likely to weigh so much
- None of us is ever likely to give birth to so many children

Here we have series of improbable, but true facts

This evening I want us to consider a series of four further facts - which are equally improbable, but also true.

However, unlike the hiccups they are not just odd, irrelevant facts - but rather four facts which are of vital significance to each one of us.

These four facts are contained in a verse with which Naomi always ends her e-mails. Yes, Naomi is the only person I know to end her emails with a verse of Scripture. And that verse is John 3.16:

**For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes may not die but have eternal love**

Probably the most famous text in the Bible, John 3.16 contains four facts which are so amazing that they are almost beyond belief:

### **IMPROBABLE FACT 1: GOD LOVES THE WORLD**

Yes, that is truly amazing! That God should love you & me is almost beyond belief. Let me explain:

Is it not amazing that the God who made the heavens & the earth, who set in motion the evolutionary process, who sustains our everyday life, should love you & me! It's mind-boggling!

The Psalmist expressed his wonder in this way: "**When I look at the sky, which you have made, at the moon and the stars, which you set in their places – what are human beings that you think of them; mere mortals that you care for them?**" (Ps 8.3-4). What indeed? We are so small & insignificant.

Can you imagine God taking an interest in our world, let alone in people like you and me? The nearest parallel to God's love for us would be if you were to have a crush on an ant. Such a crush would be ludicrous.

But God does care - indeed, he loves you and me

But God's love is even more amazing than that. God loves not simply us mortals, creatures of time, who one day are & the next day are not, he also loves us in our waywardness – or to use technical religious language, he loves us in our sinfulness. Amazingly he loves not just the best of us - he loves the worst of us too!. In fact he loves the whole world.

I.e. God loves not just the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury, he also loves

- The Taliban and Al-Qaida,
- He loves the abductors of Madeline McCann and the abusers of Baby P,
- He loves even the worst of humankind

Indeed, God loves you & me.

Let's be honest: we are scarcely the most loveable of creatures, whatever the girl-friend might say.

There is so much in us which is selfish & greedy, unloving & unkind.

But God loves us.

The wonder increases once we appreciate that the God who made the heavens & the earth is a holy God. The prophet Habakkuk once said "**Your eyes are too pure to look at evil, and you cannot stand the sight of people doing wrong**" (1.13)

It is this God, in whose presence sin can as much exist as ice in a fiery furnace, who loves you and me.

It is almost beyond belief - and yet it is true.

How do we know it is true? This leads us on to our 2nd improbable fact

## **IMPROBABLE FACT 2: GOD GAVE HIS ONLY SON**

That too is an incredible statement. How could anybody love us so much?

You parents, just think about it: would there be anyone for whom you would be willing to sacrifice your son/daughter.

However much you may admire somebody, would you be willing to offer your child's life in their stead?

Some years ago my eldest son Jonathan & his friends were asked the following question at school: "*What would you do if you saw two people drowning in river - one was your father, and the other a scientist on verge of discovering the final cure for cancer - if you could save only one, which one would you save?*"

All the boys in Jonathan's VI form said: "My father"!

The fact is that whatever anybody else may think about children/parents, we value members of our family far too highly to put somebody else before them. However awkward the children can get, however difficult our parents can get, there is nothing more precious than our family.

‘Blood is thicker than water’, we say. BUT the Bible declares that: "**God gave his only Son**".

It is no exaggeration to say that the death of Jesus is one of the most incredible events in history. Here I have in mind not that Jesus died on a Cross – thousands of unfortunates experienced that excruciating form of death, but that Jesus out of love for us should die for us that we might have life – that we might be saved.

Listen to the Apostle Paul reflect on the incredible love of God: "**God has shown us much he loves us – it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us**"

(Rom 5.8).

In a way which defies human comprehension Jesus died for our sins.

Just imagine if you were to see a person drowning in a cesspool of human waste - you would be shocked/sickened - yet that's what happened to Jesus.

The only difference = the sewage in which he drowned was moral not material - he drowned in the cesspool of our sin - and he swallowed it to the end.

And what's more he did it for us.

"**God gave his only Son**". That's how we know he loves us.

God's love is almost beyond belief.

### **IMPROBABLE FACT 3: GOD'S GIFT IS ETERNAL LIFE**

Let's face it: Nothing is eternal - nothing lasts.

- The carpet we were told would last a lifetime ultimately wears out
- the car in which we invested a small fortune rusts away

We live today in a consumer society, where everything is built to fail.

What is true of so-called consumer ‘durables’ is also true of you and me

Centuries ago the Psalmist wrote: "**Seventy years is all we have – eighty years if we are strong; life is soon over, and we are gone** (Ps 90.10).

In spite of all the advances in modern medicine, this is still substantially true. Neither drugs nor surgery can prolong life indefinitely. Nobody lives forever..

Yes, let me ram home this point:

You and I, as we are, won't last forever - one day you & I have got to die.

Along with income tax, death is the great certainty of life - your death

We may smile, but it's true - so true, that many of us do our best to stick our heads in the sand and forget about it all.

Against this background John declares: God offers eternal life - life that goes beyond the grave - life that never ends. Jesus himself said: "**I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live, even though they die**", (John 11:25)

Jesus offers eternal life. Needless to say, this is not mere prolongation of life - who would want that? That would be hell itself.

No, it's a new quality of life, life with God himself.

If this isn't good news, then what is?

What's more, this life can start this side of the grave.

Jesus in his conversation with Nicodemus kept on saying: "**You must be born again**". Poor old Nicodemus took it literally: "**How can a grown man be born again? He certainly cannot enter his mother's womb and be born a second time?**" (John 3.4). But Jesus was talking not about physical birth, but about spiritual birth.

Life can begin again now - there can be a new dimension to life in the here and now. Christians may be in the world, but they are not of the world.

If it all sounds highly improbable to you, then dare I suggest that this is only because you have never experienced it. *"People who tell me there is no God are like a six year old saying there is no such thing as passionate love. They just haven't experienced him yet"* (W. Alfred).

#### **IMPROBABLE FACT 4: ETERNAL LIFE IS FOR THOSE WHO BELIEVE**

John 3:16 "**For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life**".

Here we have yet another incredible statement.

Reason says: God would scarcely offer such a fantastic gift without conditions - why, it would be like throwing pearls before swine.

We surely must have something to do to deserve this gift of eternal life.

This is the attitude of religious people in general – it is the attitude of followers of Islam & Judaism - of many nominal Christians here in Britain: if God is going to do something for us, then we have to work for it, we have to deserve it.

God surely only gives eternal life to those who have lived a good life - who have been good parents - who have done a good turn for a neighbour.

But no - eternal life = for those who believe.

If eternal life were for those who deserved it, then none of us would ever experience it - not even the most respectable of us would get a look in.

For the Bible tells us very clearly that our best is not good enough

Rom 3:23 "**Everyone has sinned**" – we have all fallen short of the mark.

Sadly God's entry requirements for heaven are impossibly demanding.

None of us can possibly get a grade A in everything we do.

There is no way of getting into God's heaven through our own efforts.

But thank God, we don't have to try to do the impossible.

Jesus has done all that is necessary. He died on the Cross that we might be forgiven .

He has dealt with your sin & mine.  
All we have to do is to believe.  
That may sound improbable, but it is true.

Let me spell it out

- We need to believe in the sense that we need to recognize that Jesus didn't just die for the world – but he died for you, for me. Faith needs to get personal.
- The story is told of a boy with learning difficulties who lived a tragically brief life. He died in agony after swallowing weed-killer by mistake. As he lay in hospital, he repeated over & over again John 3.16, a text he had learned in Sunday School. But he repeated it in this way: "**God loved John so much that he gave his only Son that if John believes in him, John will not perish**" He made this verse his own - will you do the same?

Faith needs to become personal – as personal as it has become for Naomi.  
Tonight as she is baptized, she will be dramatizing her faith – as she goes under the water she will be saying, 'Yes Lord Jesus, you died for me'; as she comes up out of the water, she will be saying, 'Yes Lord Jesus, you rose for me'.  
For baptism is for believers – for those who believe that God loved them so much that he gave his life for them.

I began by referring to the way in which Naomi ends her e-mails.  
One of my deacons, who rightly believes that Christians should be in the business of changing the world, always ends his e-mails with the slogan: '*Doing nothing is not an option*'.

However, as far as John 3.16 is concerned, '*Doing nothing is a dreadful option*'.  
For while it is true that "**Everyone who believes in him shall ... have eternal life**", the converse is also true: **Everyone who does not believe, shall not die** - shall perish as the older versions put it.  
The choice is ours. As Jesus said on another occasion, there are two ways: the way to life, the way to hell (Matt 7.13-14).

This evening your life is at stake. Forgive me if I sound over-melodramatic - but it happens to be true.  
God in his love offer us eternal life - but, as with other special offers, there's an expiry date - this offer only lasts this lifetime - so, for eternity's sake, make sure you don't miss out.