

## **JOHN 3.16 AGAIN. OR: GOD LOVES EVERYBODY – WOW!**

*Chelmsford 29 January 2012*

### **GOD’S LOVE FOR EVERYBODY IS AMAZING**

In the days when there were telegrams, an infatuated young man was sending his girlfriend a telegram which read: ‘*Ozzy loves his Woozy, Woozy, Woozy*’. ‘*You can have another ‘Woozy’ without it costing any more*’, said the clerk in the Post Office. ‘*No thanks*’, replied the young man, ‘*I think that would sound rather silly*’.

Yes, love can be a silly business – it makes us say and do the silliest of things. According to one wit (Ambrose Pierce), ‘*Love is a form of temporary insanity curable by marriage*’. Indeed, I am told that according to the Chinese Communist Manifesto, ‘*Making love is a mental illness that wastes time and energy*’.

But this morning I don’t want to talk about the silliness or madness of human love, but rather the amazing, mind-boggling, unreasonable love of God for you and me. Listen to the words of John 3.16: “**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**”.

John 3.16: without exaggeration, it is the most famous text in the Bible. I have checked my records: over 40 years of ministry I have preached on this text 20 different times – of those twenty times, six of those times have been here in Chelmsford. No, it has not always been the same sermon. I have managed to preach four totally different sermons, and even when I have repeated myself I have always managed to tweak the sermon so that it hopefully seems different.

And here I am again – wanting to preach on John 3.16. Indeed, I have filed this sermon in my computer as ‘*John 3.16 again*’. But why return to John 3.16 again, someone might ask? Why not preach on another text instead? For the simple reason that John 3.16 is the heart of the Gospel. Martin Luther once remarked that in the Bible we have a number of little Bibles: i.e. verses or passages of scripture which express in a summary fashion the good news of Jesus. And John 3.16 is such a little Bible. It is the Gospel within the Gospel. Here we have the heart of the Christian message.

Let me tell you a story about Karl Barth. Karl Barth was a great theologian – indeed, he along with Thomas Aquinas are said to be the two greatest theologians of the church. Barth was a real theological heavy weight – what’s more he wrote book after book. To take just one of his books, his *Church Dogmatics* runs to 14 volumes. On one occasion Karl Barth was spending an evening with some friends. Curious to know more about the great theologian’s thinking, one of those present asked: ‘*What is the most profound thought that ever entered your mind?*’. After a brief moment of reflection Barth replied, “*The*

*most profound thought I have ever known is the simple truth: 'Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so'".*

This brings me back to my text – John 3.16: **“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”**. Or in the more familiar words of the Authorised Bible: **“God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life”**.

As soon as I hear this form of the text I remember the home of my grandparents.

They lived in a large 3-storey house – as one entered the house there was a somewhat grand hall. On one side a sideboard adorned with what were probably Art Deco statuettes; on the other side of the hall between two doors a huge stag's head.

In one corner a container for my grandfather's gold-topped walking sticks – if the truth be told, he was quite a dandy, for along with his gold-topped sticks, he wore spats over his boots, and a lovely bow-tie to go with his wing-collar.

But at the far end, over the door that led to his library, was a framed Scripture text – John 3.16 – printed out in black type. My grandfather was a preacher – and John 3.16 was at the heart of his preaching.

But how does one preach one preach today on such a well-known text?

As one American preacher said: *“Our congregations [are] filled with people far more likely to need to stifle as yawn when this passage is read than to limit the urge to leap into any immediate action... How is life to be pumped back into words that are so well known that they can no longer be heard?”* (Paul Shupe).

I may have filed today's sermon as “John 3.16 again”, but I have actually given the sermon the title: *“God loves everybody – Wow!”*. Yes, ‘Wow!’ Say it with me ‘Wow!’

In two weeks time we begin *‘Looking for Love’* – subtitled: *‘Want it. Need it. Find it’*

The underlying principle of this 7 week course is that God loves everybody – yes, everybody.

He loves not just you – he loves your neighbour next door – the family over the road.

He loves your friends – and he loves those you can't stand.

He loves your colleagues at work – he even loves your boss.

This is amazing – it is truly amazing.

If only we all really were amazed by God's love for each one of us

If only we all did want to squeal ‘Wow!’

Then frankly all this business of promoting ‘Looking for Love’ would be totally unnecessary.

Instead we would be like my mother on the London Transport no 68 bus: when at the age of 11 I passed the scholarship exam, she had to tell everybody on the bus.

Well, maybe it was indeed truly amazing that I had passed. But the point is that she was so excited – she had to tell everybody.

As over the years I have reflected on John 3.16 I keep on coming back to the thought that this verse is worthy of being included in the Guinness Book of Records: for it contains four amazingly improbable, and yet true, facts

## **AMAZING 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!

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.

For 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 those who couldn't care a fig about religion

- He loves the greediest of selfish bankers and the meanest of cheats and thieves
- He loves the faceless bureaucrats, the reckless sea captains, the immoral porn merchants
- In the words of Stuart Townsend's new song, he loves even the religion haters, the accusers, the abusers, even the worst of humankind

And 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. He loves the world – he loves everybody. Wow!

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

## **AMAZING 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**".

God's love is almost beyond belief. Wow!

### **AMAZING 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
  - Or as one lady told me this week, her oven which she bought only 8 years ago, has gone phut
- Nothing lasts. 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  
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.

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, life can begin again now - there can be a new dimension to life in the here and now. Wow!

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).

### **AMAZING 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 amazing 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

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. Wow!

Here then is the amazing love of God

- the love that love us all
- the love that has given its all
- the love that offers life beyond measure
- the love that only requires the response of our hearts.

It is amazing – it is unreasonable – it is almost beyond belief – but it is true.

My friends, here is good news

Are you excited by it? Are you overwhelmed by it? Are you overcome by it?

If not, then I confess that I have failed – I have failed to do justice to the love of God – I have failed to grip your hearts and minds with the wonder of God's love.

But if I have through the poverty of my words you have glimpsed the riches of God's grace, then let me encourage you to respond not just with a 'Wow' – but with a prayer of response.

A response in which you express your trust in this God who has loved you, and in which you express your resolve to share this love with others.