

Sunday 5th March 2023

John 3 and the Anarchy of God's Love

My son is getting a lot of work done on his new house. He has engaged the services of a number of trades people; electricians, plumbers, plasterers, joiners, painters...

He contacts them, they come over and have a look at what needs doing, they quote him a price, do the work, he pays them; that's how it works.

Except, of course, it doesn't always work.

Sometimes the contractor encounters a problem, it turns out the job is more complicated than he thought because of things that only become apparent after he starts the work, and so he asks for more money before he finishes the job.

Sometimes the work is just not done properly. And then the fun starts. Will my son pay the contractor the full agreed amount? Will the contractor come back and fix what hasn't been done properly? We are in a situation where it is unlikely that both my son and the contractor will walk away happy. Sometimes they both walk away unhappy.

This is the nature of the transactional relationships human beings have with each other. We meet, we agree the terms of the relationship; I do this if you do that. Sometimes it all works out and both sides are content. But sometimes it doesn't work out.

Our relationship with God is nothing like this. God is not interested in a transactional relationship with humanity. He offers us a grace filled relationship. And he offers this relationship to humanity through his Son Jesus Christ.

He does this, firstly, by forgiving the sins of the whole world. All our sins have already been forgiven. All the sins that have been committed by us and committed against us: forgiven. Not forgiven in return for something that we have done in return. They have been forgiven by a pre-emptive act of forgiveness that has already taken place. Sometimes it helps us to remember that Jesus has already been crucified and it is at this moment that the sins were forgiven.

And the second way he does it is through the promise of eternal life. That's not the promise of eternal life to people who have earned the right to go to heaven. That's the promise of eternal life to all who believe in Jesus Christ.

But we are human beings. Our lives are dominated by transactional relationships. I'll do this for you if you do this for me. Over and over again human beings have tried to understand their relationship with God in transactional terms.

How often do you hear people talking about heaven and hell assuming that this is a reward and punishment system set up for people who do what God wants and people who go against what God wants? We quite often hear people talk like this. It's a way of thinking that completely ignores the grace of God.

How often do you hear people talk as if only Christians will go to heaven? Because if Jesus says all who believe in him will not perish but have eternal life we assume that he is offering us a transactional relationship and that only works if people who do not believe in Jesus are not given eternal life. But, here's the thing; it's not a transactional relationship. It's a grace-filled relationship. In a grace filled relationship where is the room for eternal damnation?

All the way through the Old Testament there are people talking as if we have to follow God's laws so God will look after us and when we don't follow God's laws, God punishes us. But that ignores all the stories of people who follow God's laws enduring great hardships but being sustained in those hardships by God. And it ignores all the stories about people not following God's laws, being punished by God and then God comes back and gives them another chance. And then another chance. And then another chance.

And all the time this is happening, human beings have tried to put God in a box. At the dawn of time God made humans in his image and ever since humans have been trying return the compliment. We keep trying to define God as if he were a human being, somebody we can make a deals with and agreeing transactions with when actually, all the time something entirely different is happening; God is loving us and drawing us closer to him.

You can't put God in a box. It's not humanely possible to explain the depth of God's love for us. The extent of his grace just looks like total anarchy to us. We keep looking at God trying to understand the rules he follows and really we can't. To quote the comedian Milton Jones; we are like mice listening to Mozart.

Jesus explains this to Nicodemus. "The wind blows where it chooses and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." If you are born of water and of the Spirit you have to get used to the anarchy of God's grace; a love that doesn't follow the rules we sometimes try and impose upon it.

Abraham understood this. People think of Abraham as the man who made a deal with God. I will follow your ways if you give me descendants. That was the deal; the covenant that Abraham made with God. But actually, Paul says that isn't how the Abraham's relationship with God began. From Abraham's side it began when Abraham believed in God; a God who was bigger and wider and deeper than anything he could imagine. A God you couldn't put in a box. And from God's side it began at creation when God loved Abraham even before he was born.

But we have to understand something surely? There's no point having a sermon if we aren't meant to understand something.

Let's just focus on these two things.

Firstly, the sins of the world have already been forgiven; the sins we have committed and the sins committed against us. The past does not control us. We can kiss the guilt and bitterness goodbye.

How do we know? God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him. John 3:17

And secondly, God gave his only Son to the world so that everybody who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. The future holds no fear for us. John 3: 16

This is how the grace of God impacts on us. It removes our guilt and bitterness and fear.

We still have to live our lives in the world as it is of course. It is a world full of transactional relationships. I'll do this for you if you do this for me. Followed by; why didn't you do what you were supposed to do, now I won't do what I was supposed to do. This is how the world is at times.

But at other times the grace of God breaks through. We see it when we hear people say: I'm sorry. I forgive you. It doesn't matter, I'll sort it out. What can I do for you? How can I be there for you?

Maybe we could all try and do a bit more of that this week. We might not be following God's rules to the absolute letter. But then that's more of a human idea than a divine idea anyway. Let's see if we can follow the Spirit of God's law. Let's embrace the anarchy of God's love.