

**Lent 4 Willows & Boolaroo 15<sup>th</sup> March '15**  
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In the wilderness Jesus is more and more focussing upon and honing in on the love of God. His time in the Judean Wilderness has been testing his own thoughts and motivations for ministry. What was his motivation? "What is the Father's love for all these people? I am going to ponder this. What is the Father's love for those I live among... my many and various neighbours, ...and what is God's love for those who are enemies of our nation our faith and enemies of me and my teaching? I cannot see past your love for all people Father. Your way is always to love, I see how you love all the world."

The easy passage to preach on today is John 3:16, "*for God so loved the world...*", but before looking at that let's look at the surrounding context of that verse. Beyond the John 3:16 verse, we bump into the difficult surrounding verses that condemn and exclude and judge. Some of these verses don't sound quite so loving, gracious and forgiving.

Every time we read something from the Bible we should automatically give consideration to the *time and place* in which it was written; we should remember the historical, cultural and religious context. The time in which this was written, for example, was '*a divided, segregated and intolerant age*', by that I mean it was a time when boundaries between different people were very deeply established, very clearly defined, and very firmly maintained. We have known of such divisions... between countries: East and West Germany, South and North Korea;

between peoples: Israelis and Palestinians;

between races: blacks and whites;

and between religions In Northern Ireland and many other places.

Jerusalem was and is divided: the divisions are deep and high and enforced. The divisions are secured with walls, gates, and barbed wire, along with armed police and an army presence.

Now, most importantly... some of the old divisions were passed on to the new Christian faith, for example, in 1 Corinthians (17) we read: "...what does a believer share with an unbeliever? Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean..." yet to us now, this reflects more *the spirit of the age* than *the Spirit of Jesus*.

Elsewhere, the New Testament letters to the Romans, Colossians and Galatians tell us: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, Greek nor Roman, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." What we clearly see in the pages of the New Testament itself is the struggle for the Spirit of Jesus to breach and break free from the divisions of the age then.

At the time of writing the New Testament you were either Jew or Gentile, Greek or Roman, slave or free, there was no middle ground no margins, you were one or the other. The saying was, "those who are not for us are against us..." There were those who were *in* and those who were *out*, the first lot who were obviously out were *the Samaritans* - they forever sided with the enemies of Judah and the Jerusalem Temple and God obviously hated them!

Others who were obviously out (and cast out by God) were the tax-collectors, lepers, prostitutes, and various social, political and religious outcasts. It was a very divided world and very divided Israel. This is the context to John's gospel where he writes in the most shocking terms that *God loved the world*. What were the first Christians to make of this, when God did not love the whole world? To them God loved the righteous, his faithful people, and especially certain sections of his own faithful people – but NOT *the whole world*!

The Christian Church has at times reintroduced the *divided spirit of the age* into her theology rather than following the Spirit of Jesus. The church has at times not been the salt of the earth, not been the peacemaker and unifier, but has supported division saying it is the will of God. We too can be caught up in the spirit of our age rather than following the Spirit of Jesus who breaks down all barriers and divisions.

The Church even introduced a separatist, *holier than thou*, 'holiness movement', which was for those who sought a way apart from the world. They would seek holiness of spirit and purity in all their ways – *forgetting that they were human!* But what kind of holiness of spirit and purity in our ways does God seek in us? Surely it's the kind that was found in his Son... who sat with, ate with, walked among, who got his feet blistered and his hands dirty in caring for others? Jesus is surely our model for holiness and purity?

Coming out of the Jewish tradition of law, justice and punishment the followers of Jesus always struggled to follow his Spirit's way of freedom, grace and love unconditional. There was always a pull back to the more clearly defined: us and them, sacred and secular, holy and unclean... as if they can be divided or separated, or kept apart. Jesus' way was not to *come out from among them* but, quite the opposite to *go in among them!*

The Jewish authorities could not accept this. To them this was outrageous behaviour and as Jesus spoke with, ate with and touched them so Jesus made himself as unclean as them. Even Jesus' disciples struggled with him mixing with *the likes of them*. Even if the disciples did finally get it, they struggled to stay with it and to maintain Jesus' way. Peter, for example, was still unwilling to associate with the Gentile Christians and kept himself apart, associating only with Jewish Christians for fear of becoming unclean. He was making an '*us and them*' division in the church. It took a revelation from God for him to understand that what God called clean he should not call 'unclean'. Peter when you will realise that "God loves the world... and that to God there is neither Jew nor Gentile, Greek nor Roman, slave nor free, neither is there male nor female. Peter when will you realise that for you are all one in Christ Jesus?"

When I left Scotland the Church of Scotland was working to a new mission slogan entitled, 'A Church Without Walls'. Some loved it but of course others loathed it. 'A Church Without Walls' was felt to portray the Spirit of Jesus in removing all barriers. But without walls how do you know who is in and who is out: how could you tell who was church and who wasn't? **Precisely!** The point was to love and care and serve *all* without condition, prejudice or preference. The point is to share with Jesus in God's love for the world.

Of course it's difficult, of course it's open to abuse, of course we could be giving and even if we are not counting the cost we know that there is one. And some will immediately want walls built up again. "...For God so loved the world" doesn't mean, for God so loved the world within the walls of the church! It means God loves *all* without condition, prejudice or preference and this is precisely what we see reflected in the life and ministry of Jesus.