

John 3:14-21

Fourth Sunday in Lent

Jesus said, "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

When I first started on my own journey of faith, I had a mentor named Michael who was my guide into the life of faith. One of the things we did together was to usher, and I remember each week when the congregation would say the Nicene Creed together, Michael would be standing at the back saying it from memory. I was very impressed by this and so I committed myself to memorizing the words of the creed.

I love the creed because as we say it in worship, I think about all the people, all over the world who are standing up and saying it with me in their own places of worship. It is a visible sign of God's grace shared by Christians every Sunday. In its words we affirm the nature and relationship of the Trinity and the triune God's relationship with the church.

But as I've reflected on the creed over the years, I've come to see that there is a big glaring hole in the middle of it that leaves out something very important for us. The life of Jesus. Just about in the middle it says;

"For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried."

He was born, through the union of Spirit and Mary, and then it immediately jumps to his death at the order of Pilate with encouragement from the leaders of Jerusalem. I don't hold the creed alone responsible, but I think it reinforces an unfortunate and, I think, selfish tendency to see Jesus as merely a kind of sacrificial victim whose only purpose was to die for us.

In fact, I would say that the life of Jesus is as, if not more, important for our salvation than his death. Human sinfulness made Jesus's death inevitable, but there was always the possibility that we would have accepted his presence and his words and responded with joy, upturning the world to usher in the vision of God.

The life of Jesus is vital to us because it shows how a life lived within the loving grace of God should be lived. His is the mode and example of the best possible life for us. A life dedicated to making true and meaningful connections with others, of respecting the dignity of all who he encounters, of seeing the potential and possibility in everyone and doing what he can to help them achieve that.

Jesus died not so much for us but because of us and our fears and insecurities that hold us back from being the good, loving beings God intended. Indeed, Jesus lived for us and showed us how we might overcome the barriers we have built that are keeping us from fully inhabiting the kingdom life of grace.