

I recently learned something new in English and I am so happy I get a chance to share it with you today because it has actually has a lot to do with the way we understand (or more likely misunderstand) our Gospel and the famous John 3:16: "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".

A few weeks ago, I was reading a book called: " The Bible does not say that" by the Dr Joel Hoffman, a Jewish scholar who is actually interested also in the New Testament. And what Dr Hoffman does in his book, is that he revisits certain expressions taken from the Bible and their traditional interpretations. I was a bit disappointed at the beginning because it does not seem mind blowing at first sight, it's just a little nuances like the commentators of the Torah generally do, noticing a small glitch in the text that would never matter to you, but yet, if you start thinking about it, it can bring a new perspective on what you thought you believed.

And this is what Dr Hoffman says about John 3:16 in general and the "God so loved the world" more specifically. He says that in our modern English translations of the Bible, we still use for John 3:16 the King James Version translation of the Greek, when the word "so" meant something very different than today, and this is the reason we often misinterpret the verse. I've just said that I was "so" happy to share with you, and I get this is what you all understood: I am *very* happy, because this is what *so* means in this context, right? But you may know that in the 17th century this was not what *so* meant. *So* meant "in this way" like in the expression "So help me God", "I do so declare" etc...In the 17th century, "so" meant: "in this way", and not "very" or "very much". This meaning is still present in modern English, when we say for example: "I don't think so". Well, the "so" of the King James Version is a translation of the Greek word "Outôs" that does not mean at all "very much", but it means: "in this way". A more accurate translation of the verse would be something like: *This is the way in which God loved the world, God gave his only Son.*

God does not love the world *very much*. At least, not in John's Gospel. Because if you pay attention, in John's, the *world* never means *the whole earth* or *everybody*. The world is not even a territory or a category of people, the world is this sinful dimension of human life that rejects God, better understood in the adverb: "Worldly". A "worldly" way of understanding life is cutting it out from all spiritual roots and John is thoroughly consistent with that (the only occurrence where John seems to have something positive to say about the *world* is this John 3:16, and now we know this is not what he meant). According to John, God does not approve of the world, God does not cherish the world as it is, but God loves it in this way that even in the deeper darkness God brings salvation in the giving of Godself, where God will be hated, rejected, put to death in the person of Jesus. By the way, the Gospel does not say that God gave God's Son to be put to death, but this is what happens and the risks God took stepping into a place that has literally no room for God.

Long story short, this what we learn from the Gospel today: God loves in this way that God gives, always and whatever the circumstances, and what God gives is Godself.

Well, now we may want to think about the way we love, don't we? It's interesting because in the Bible the word love appears roughly 300 times, but the word "to give" almost a thousand times. I guess that we often think about love as what we feel, maybe what we think, or even what we do: we feel "strongly", we think "highly", we do "a lot" - often in terms of quantity but not always in terms of quality, how we need to love in a certain way. And the way the Bible teaches us today, in this very verse we are studying but also throughout the whole Scriptures, is that love is about giving. It's about giving something of ourselves, and the result of this giving is to bring life. Love is about giving something that brings 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"*.

Love is life-giving.

Maybe you've heard that from people who fall in love, they say: *It makes me feel alive*. Well, yes that's what love is supposed to do, love is about being alive. And relationships are meant to be life giving. Often the giving of ourselves is about being present, giving time, but sometimes it's also about being mindful and giving space. In both cases, it is often forgetting about our own needs and our own agenda. Love is supposed to bring us life, but relationships are often difficult or disappointing instead because we think so much (and on both ends) about what we want to get out of love, we think about love as possessing instead of thinking of love as giving. We hold on to those we love. But the Bible teaches us that love is always about looking beyond ourselves. I read a beautiful article in the newspaper this week. It told the story of two teachers in a school of our area. One of them needed a kidney transplant, and this is what the other one just did: she gave her one of her kidneys. The two women weren't very close to start with, but they attended Bible study together and at some point, this is how God spoke to the healthy woman: She understood she was called to give her kidney to her colleague. It was certainly about "loving very much", but it was also about loving well. It was about doing something very concrete, very specific, it was about giving, giving oneself and giving life. Of course, it was a whole discernment process for the donor, not something she decided on the spur of the moment. We aren't all called to give a kidney, but this woman is exemplary in the sense that she wondered: How can I best love my neighbor in the situation I am in, how am I called to give something of myself to bring life? We all have different responses to that. But it's all about looking beyond ourselves.

Looking beyond ourselves, I think this is what this strange story today with the snakes is all about. The Israelites are very self centered, I don't blame them. Being in the desert eating manna and quail, they want to go back to Egypt. Yet their complaining only brings them poisonous snakes. Well, what I have heard is that if you're bitten by a snake, the first thing you need to apply pressure and remain calm, so the poison does not reach the heart. Because if it reaches the heart, then it goes through your whole system and may kill you. I think what God calls his people to do is this: in the midst of trials, don't let the poison reach the heart and the way you can do that is to look beyond, at the pole, the bronze snake, but mainly it means: look beyond your own suffering.

For us as Christians, we are called to look beyond not only because there is something bigger than us, the way traditional societies looked at their poles and totem, but because on our pole, on our totem, the cross, there is another suffering than ours. We see the sufferings of God and of all people, and just the ability of seeing it frees us from ourselves and bring us healing, not because we pretend our suffering does not exist, but because we will learn how to love. Bites are unavoidable in this life, but we need to make sure the poison does not reach the heart. I am not sure we have always power over our own hearts, but God does. God shows us the way to go beyond our own selves so we can love best. It means we have to trust.

One thing we sometimes overlook about John 3:16 is the risk God took with us, by giving his Son to us, coming into the world that is such a hostile place for him. If we want to love our neighbors and to love God, we have to start trusting them so we can enter a relationships, it may not always feel comfortable: to speak to the homeless, to take care of the friend who has cancer, to welcome a foster child, to take on a new service in the church. Whatever that is. But this is what faith is all about. When Moses or Jesus asks us to believe, it does not have much to do with accepting a religious doctrine! When Jesus speaks about those who are already condemned because they don't receive him, he's not talking about the people who don't like to go to church! He's talking about the people around him, the Scribes, the Pharisees, who are trying to put him to death. Jesus is not talking about people living on the other side of the world who have never heard of him or being raised in the Christian faith! Believing is about trusting. Trusting that in our darkness, there is another dimension breaking in that enables us to be "doing what is true and coming to the light". It's about choosing a life-giving love, this life-giving love God has revealed to us in Jesus-Christ. Because the good news is that we don't have to do it on our own, God came in our darkness "so that it may be clearly seen that [our] deeds have been done in God". We love in God and through God. Our collect today reminds us that Jesus is the true bread that gives eternal life, I this is what we remember in our Eucharistic Prayer each time we lift up the bread: We do everything "By him and in him and with him, this is the way we love as Christians. Amen.