

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

It is often said that everyone has their favourite bit of the bible. Some people just love the Christmas story. For others – it's the resurrection. I know some people whose go-to parts of the bible is always the psalms. But this verse has on many occasion been referred to as everyone's text. I haven't seen it for a while but I remembering quite often seeing, particularly on the television, large crowds of people, and in there somewhere there was quite often someone with a placard simply saying John 3:16..

And I'm going to explain this morning why its my go-to text; why it is the one verse in the bible on which all may faith is based. And what is more, why it is such an appropriate text to be looking at on Mothering Sunday.

But first, let's look at those couple of verses just before it – because they certainly need some explaining.

“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

Here John goes back to a strange Old Testament story which is told in the book of Numbers. On their journey through the wilderness the people of Israel moaned and complained and regretted that they had ever left Egypt. To punish them God sent a plague of deadly fiery serpents; the people repented and cried for mercy. God instructed Moses to make an image of a serpent and to hold it up in the middle of the camp and those who looked upon the serpent were healed.

That story impressed the Israelites. They told how in later times how that serpent became an idol and in the days of the king Hezekiah had to be destroyed because people were worshipping it. The Jews themselves were always a little puzzled by this incident in view of the fact that they were absolutely forbidden to make graven images. The rabbis explained it this way: “It was not the serpent that gave life. So long as Moses lifted up the serpent, they believed in him who had commanded Moses to act like this. It was God that healed them.”. The healing power lay not in the serpent; it was only a symbol to turn their thoughts to God; and when they did that they were healed.

So now we know we are not focussing on symbols, but we are focussing on God himself, let's have a look at verse 16. And there are three clear messages in this one verse.

First, the question of whether we are saved or not is in God's hands – not in anyone else's, not even in Jesus' hands. Sometimes people think of Christianity in terms of a stern, angry, unforgiving God and a gentle, caring, forgiving Jesus. It is almost as if Jesus somehow does something to convince mean old God that actually we are OK , and that he should change his mind about us. But this verse could not be

clearer. "For God so loved the world". It was God who sent his Son, and he sent him because he loved us.

Second, and I've just alluded to this, the mainspring of God's being is, Love. For hundreds if not thousands of years, God has been looking at the people he created, and you really wonder whether he is saying, "I'll break them, I'll discipline them, I'll whip them into shape." But he is not doing anything of the sort. God is not just acting for his own sake to try and establish his power over us. God is the father who wants to welcome his roaming children back home, because he loves each and every one of us. "For God so loved the world.

Third it tells us of how wide, how broad, how huge this love is. He doesn't just love the people who loved him; he didn't just love the good people – whoever they are; he loved us all. He loved those who we might see as unlovable, those who nobody else would want to be close to. He loves those who spurn the love of God – all are included in this vast inclusive love of God. "For God so loved the World."

There are a couple of other things in this verse that adds to its enormity. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son." God's love for the world is greater than his love for his son – otherwise, surely, he would not have given his one and only son. I don't know about you but that really makes me feel incredibly humble. That God loves me, and admittedly everyone else as well, more than his own Son. Because we all know what, "he gave his one and only son" means – he gave him to the cross, so that he would die.

And the last is one of the smallest words in the verse, "so that whoever believes in him". It is not believes him. It is not just believing what Jesus said. It is believing that Jesus meant what he said and following everything Jesus told us to do. The best analogy I could think of was that if you are into something like bungee jumping, and someone says to you, the rope will hold you, don't worry. That's not enough for you to jump off whatever you are standing on. You have to believe that the rope will actually hold you before you can make the decision to jump. It's the same with Jesus. Jesus may do all sorts of interesting things, but unless you follow exactly what he tells you then those interesting things are worthless.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." That is what God wants for us. That's why I love that verse in the bible above all others.

And just in case you are not sure about any of this, let's take a quick look at verse 17. "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him." If anyone ever doubted why we as a church are working so hard to try and convince people that God is really worth

listening to, then there is the answer. He does not want to destroy the world – it rather feels sometimes that that is what we are trying to do – he wants to save the world, through the death of his son Jesus.

And why do I think this is such a verse for Mothering Sunday. Because it's all about relationships. It's all about the relationship between us and a heavenly parent.

Today we are celebrating Mothers, in June we will celebrate Fathers, every day we celebrate God, who can be seen as either Mother or Father – and let's clear that one up. The idea of God is hard enough for us to understand anyway, but to start talking about a non human being who is a parent to us is even harder, so we add a degree of humanity to God and in the times when the bible was written that humanity was always going to male, but could just have easily have been female.

But from the moment a child is born, there is that relationship between a mother and child that is so all consuming – in the way that the relationship between God and the world is so all consuming. It is a relationship totally based on love. But don't get me wrong, I do understand that life is not as simple as the picture I am painting – some mother child relationships just don't work, and for some people Mothering Sunday is a really hard day – broken relationships, inability to have children or never met the right partner, really missing a mother no longer with us, it can be a rotten day. But what I am saying today is that one of the best ways to understand the relationship between God and us, is to compare it to the, hoped for, relationship between mother and child – and these relationships, both of them, work both ways.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only child, so that whoever believes in that child shall not perish but have eternal life. Along with Mothers today, that is truly worth celebrating.