

Fourth Sunday in Lent March 10, 2024

Introduction to the themes for the season and today

Later today you will hear read Jesus' words to a rabbi who has come calling. Jesus would speak of being "lifted up" for the sake of the world. For the writer of John's Gospel, "lifted up" means four things—Jesus becoming human, his crucifixion, his resurrection and finally his ascension. All of these things together make up Jesus' saving work in the world. Thinking on that, we remember that you can't have Good Friday without Easter, nor can you have Easter without Good Friday. Living in Lent, we try to remember that and hold fast to the fact that God's love is behind it all.

GOSPEL John 3:14-21

14And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, 15that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. 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. 17"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. 18Those 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. 19And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. 20For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. 21But 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."

SERMON

John's Gospel is all about bringing heaven and earth together to the point of quoting Jesus as saying eternal life is about a relationship with God both in this life and in whatever comes next.

Maybe a story suits the day and those familiar words about God so loving the world. A woman known to students and young adults as “Mama Bethune” was born to former slaves. She grew up in the strictly segregated society of the Southern US. Mary McLeod’s mentors encouraged her to further her own schooling and that led to her founding a school for girls by the time she was thirty. Later she would establish a university; the first among historically black colleges and universities in the US. Dozens of schools in the US bear her name today. Mary McLeod Bethune spoke up for a woman’s right to vote, equality among races, and other civil rights. She taught, she advocated and she gave all she had to help others. What fuelled this dynamic woman who served as trusted advisor to five US Presidents? Her response is quoted here:

Mary McLeod Bethune: “With these words [John 3:16] the scales fell from my eyes and the light came flooding in. My sense of inferiority, my fear of handicaps, dropped away. “Whosoever,” it said. No Jew nor Gentile, no Catholic nor Protestant, no black nor white; just “whosoever.” It means that I, a humble Negro girl, had just as much chance as anybody in the sight and love of God. These words stored up a battery of faith and confidence and determination in my heart, which has not failed me to this day”.

Earlier this week a group of us focused our meditative prayers on the verse many know by heart: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes may not perish but have eternal life”(John 3:16). Some in our group spoke of feeling a sense of expansiveness as the words “world” and “everyone who believes” were read.

You might imagine a recurring cycle the expansive and universal love of God finding people like Mary McLeod Bethune— In turn, those acts of love take root in others and they too strive to love their neighbour.

We might detect echoes a master stroke from John’s Gospel as images shift from the cosmos to the day to day lives of a single person and back again—The very

ground of being becomes enfleshed as a human being...for the sake of the world and even the cosmos itself. The nuclear reaction that starts and perpetuates such a cycle of restoration is God's steadfast love.