

Lent 4 2021: John 3.14-21

14th March 2021

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Theme: The goodness of judgement

When I was in my early twenties I began work in a Personnel Department of a large company and soon discovered that I was a very shy young man who lacked confidence in the company of other people.

Some one suggested to me that a good way of developing confidence would be to join a group called "Rostrum". Rostrum is a public speaking group. It's very friendly...everyone goes for a meal together and you begin by doing a one minute prepared speech in front of everyone on a topic of your own choice and then you gradually work up to longer and longer speeches. Then after the speech the other club members give you feedback.

I can still remember my first 1minute speech on a cold wintry Melbourne night. I can't remember the topic but I can remember how I felt...absolutely terrified...my voice quavered through the talk, knees knocking together. It was one of the scariest experiences of my life. I later discovered that research has been done about how people feel about public speaking. The research has shown, that most people, if given a choice between speaking to a group and throwing themselves out of a boat into shark infested waters, would take their chances with the sharks.

However, I have to say that it has become a lot easier over the years and I now actually look forward to it. I wonder why public speaking is so scary for most people?

I suppose a big part of it is that we expose ourselves to the fear of judgement. When we stand up in front of people we can feel very exposed. We might fear that people will think us incompetent or boring or unattractive.

St Paul had a powerful insight that the power of Sin, uses law as a weapon against us. It might be an unspoken law like this, "you must be the perfect public speaker and if you aren't then you're a failure", or "you must be the perfect spouse" or "you must not make mistakes as a parent", "you must be the perfect child"

Once we set up these kinds of laws in our own minds, the judgement which follows can be terrible.

This is one reason why today's Gospel is such good news. Jesus says, **"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"** (John 3:16-17)

The saving power of God's action comes in God revealing himself as the one who loves us unconditionally, to the extent of giving himself for us regardless of our performance. St. Paul puts it this way, **"God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us"** (Romans 5:8)

Union with God is not about our performance. It is about who God is, what *God does for and in us*. It is a failure in our communication of the gospel to know that many people think it's all about gaining more credits and debits in life and we end up in the black we get into a nice place called heaven (precisely what someone said to me in a conversation recently).

In light of all this, what are we talking about when we use words like 'judgement'? John *reworks* the nature of judgement. He says, 'THIS is judgement – that the light has come into the cosmos and people loved the darkness rather than the light – for everyone who does evil things hates the light and does not approach the light for fear his/her deeds will be exposed'.

The LIGHT of Christ is unconditional love which shines on us and reveals everything there is to know about us. It is very exposing (a bit like public speaking) so we can find ourselves hiding. I think of my compost bin. When I open the compost bin and flood it with light, all the cockroaches go scurrying away – they can't stand the light. That is what judgement is. It is avoid the love which loves us SO much that this love will die for us. To HIDE from the light is self-judgement. It is to be still stuck under the horrible self-accusations, or stuck in accusations against others which build up in us like a poison. The good purpose of God's light, which is the judgement of love, is that it is an honest exposure to divine love, which is a love which is never violent.

One final thought. Another way I think of judgement is my experience of swimming at Scarborough beach. Scarborough Beach often has very big waves that dump down from a great height rather than breaking slowly and gently. If I go to Scarborough Beach and I swim out to where the big breakers are coming in, there is a certain *scary* point at which I have to make a decision. The point comes when I am looking up at the absolute beauty and power of the 2 or 3 metre high face of a wave coming straight at me. At that point I have a critical decision to make. I have two choices: *dive....* or *run in the other direction*. The choice I make, makes all the difference.

If I dive deep, then I slip safely into the depth and beauty of the wave passing around me and over me. I come up the other side, refreshed. I look back along the sparkling beach, the other swimmers, the beautiful day and my life is glorious.

But if I turn my back on the wave....well it's usually an ugly experience. It usually means being hammered into the beach, tossed around, munched and emerging rather bruised, with sand in my shorts and in my hair. I've now discovered that I can't out run a wave. And this experience in itself is also grace. This experience is not punishment – it is the gift of learning about the ocean. The wave totally expends itself in the gift of itself.

In all this, the fundamental character of the wave did not change. The wave did not set out to judge me...it was simply a beautiful wave, given with the offer of life, but the way I approached it changed my experience of it.

And so it is with Christ, **"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"**