

Smudgement (John 3:14-21)

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

Introducing Theme: Smudgement

Just before anyone gets confused and rushes to their phones to look up *Smudgement* - our theme for today - it is my made-up word to frame our scripture from John 3.

What's your favourite verse? Like it or not, John 3:16 is a top ten contender. It may evoke inspiration and ambivalence in different ways and at different times in your faith journey. I know it was more inspirational when I first started as a Christian. Its talk of judgement and salvation demarcating those who are in and out of favour with God gave me an initial faith burst & even now a kind of self-righteous comfort.

Today, funnily enough, my ambivalence comes in that it is one of the few texts that applies the importance of Jesus to individuals - *so that everyone* - not *all* who believe. Though, to be fair, discussing how much of the Christian faith is best is looked at as a community and how much is best looked at as an individual is another day's chat.

Worth noting that when we hear this familiar text it is not Jesus who is being quoted but the writer of John's thoughts - an interpretation of why Jesus is important. Smudgement is an acknowledgement that this text can create both faith inspiring wonder and ambivalence for many of us thus the quote by comedienne Emo Philips – “I asked God for a bike, but I know God doesn't work that way. So, I stole a bike and asked for forgiveness.”

I hope as we worship and reflect we will not let the words of judgement and perishing trigger us to miss the richness of this wisdom from John's Gospel.

Life is Messy

I recently had lunch with a mate, as noble a compassionate human being and Christian I know, who shared a story about one of his longstanding clients now in their 80's.

Illustration: Lunch with Kambiz (Pt 1)

He told me about a family whom he had represented as a lawyer for long time. Fair to say they were migrants with typical traditional views of family and family obligations. With sadness he shared that they had fallen out with their children. Their son had developed addictions and so they cut themselves off from him and not talked to him in years. They had also fallen out with their

daughter and were no longer talking to her. For a time they invested their hopes in their granddaughter but that went pear shaped not long ago. All incredibly poignant, and my lawyer mate was really sad. I found his compassion wondrous and moving - as one with a similar migrant but second-generation background I was more - really, how dumb! Smudgement!

There by the grace of God go all of us that we would fall out with those whom we most love.

19 And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.

The family members may argue whose deeds lead to this awful scenario but hard to deny that the outcome is less than optimal - just tragic.

Illustration: Lunch with Kambiz (Pt2)

So how did the parents respond? They decided to formally disown their children and grandchild and write them out of their wills! My friend was aghast and apart from the fact that it is really hard in Australian law to write your progeny out of the will, he advised against this, but they proceeded anyway.

There by the grace of God go all of us who would want to judge those who we think should love us more and are unworthy of our benefice.

18 Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already.

The parents may argue their progeny brought this condemnation on themselves but it feels like they let their disappointments grow into self-righteous revenge - just sad.

Illustration: Lunch with Kambiz (Pt 3)

The parents, having changed their will, realigned their relationships and connected with another family. They found people who shared their traditional family outlook and so their bond grew. So, they asked my lawyer friend to change their will to benefit them. Again, my friend advised against it but they proceeded anyway.

There by the grace of God go all of us who see light at the end of the tunnel and do not realise it is a train coming their way.

20 For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed.

The parents had let their disappointments confuse what is light and what is darkness- just bizarre.

Illustration: Lunch with Kambiz (Pt 4)

This family become the surrogate family they had wished for as fitting their traditional cultural background where elders are respected and children are expected to look after them in their dotage. So, they decided they would give them some of their assets to seal their bond and not leave their assets to lottery of an estate challenge in the courts. Again, my friend strongly advised against this, but things were going so well with the new 'family'. First with properties worth millions and eventually even their family home was signed over no strings attached. My friend was aghast but

they proceeded anyway to write all their assets to this new family and literally disown their progeny.

There by grace of God go all of us who have pinned our hopes on something saving us that is not up to it.

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness as a way for people to go back to God rather than perish in misguided grumbling.

The parents just missed the road sign that said STOP, WRONG WAY, GO BACK - just awful.

Illustration: Lunch with Kambiz (Pt 5)

Well eventually the inevitable happened - they fell out with this new family. They came back to my friend and confessed that he was right. Now they were asking my friend was there any legal recourse to get their properties back which my friend indicated would be difficult.

There by the grace of God go all of us who deluded ourselves in our righteousness but finally realise that we have blundered with no way back.

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.

The parents have let their high mindedness led them to have all that they love and cherish to perish - just smudgement.

The lesson of John 3:16 is that it is better to have eternal life rather than to perish.

The cautionary tale is that entitled righteousness can lead to the opposite of love.

John's Message.

We all have moments when we think we deserve a bike and then find a way to get it.

We all have moments where we land in darkness rather than the light, where we miss the big picture and develop tunnel vision.

We all have moments when we are afflicted by those who get stuck in darkness rather than the light - sometimes we are the afflicters.

We all are inclined to indulge ourselves in judgments which give us immediate comfort but make it worse.

We all are the recipients of other's judgments which aggrieve and put us out.

May I suggest the smudgement lesson for us today - is that we are most vulnerable to perish when we are at our most entitled for there is the road to disappointment.

- When we expect our progeny to do our bidding and they disappoint us.

- When we expect the PowerPoint show to work and gremlins get us.

- When MUC does not deliver what we want - and if I can be cheeky - when we expect an acoustic piano and we have to plod on unaccompanied.

- When we expect God to give us bikes instead of relying on God's forgiveness.

Where judgement, salvation, light, darkness become entitled dogmatic millstones rather metaphors of grace, transformation and doing good - smudgement!

All the metaphors of light, darkness, judgment, salvation that John's Gospel uses in this text guide us on the importance of Jesus to each of us.

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.

Illustration: Lunch with Kambiz (Pt 6)

To top it all this family decided they needed a new lawyer to pursue restitution. He got sacked as his reward! My friend in the midst of his profound sadness and empathy for the family wryly bemoaned that this would mean that he would have to do a whole lot of work for this case as a witness and no remuneration! Perish indeed?

There by the grace of God go all of us who realise we have reached the limits of our compassion and feel put out accordingly.

We can all be the parents who judge and the progeny who have disappointed.

As Christians we need to hold on to the liberation of John 3:16 all the while making sure that smudgement is not far away.

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.

Eternal life is not about our soul living forever - in John it is about living life now in a way God desires that we would live for ever more!

John's gospel declares God's Son made and makes a difference now and forever – not by making those who follow him being superior, but being aware of our foibles.

John paints a picture where God is footing the cost and out of thankfulness we seek to do our best and seek solace in the God of Jesus - smudgement!

God so loved that everyone, even tradition bound parents, who disown those they are called to love and choose foolishness rather than the light may not perish but have eternal life.

Song: On The Radio (Regina Spektor - Russian Jewish heritage)

Russian born Jewish musician - not quite the Sex Pistols - but I hope you find it a way to reflect on our scriptures today as they apply to your life today.

As we hear this snippet may you bring to mind those whom you love and those who love you, those you depend on and those who depend on you.

*You're young until you're not
You love until you don't
You try until you can't
You laugh until you cry
You cry until you laugh
And everyone must breathe
Until their dying breath*

*No, this is how it works
You peer inside yourself
You take the things you like
Then try to love the things you took
And then you take that love you made
And stick it into some
Someone else's heart
Pumping someone else's blood
And walking arm in arm
You hope it don't get harmed
But even if it does
You'll just do it all again*