

John 1:1-17      The Verdict  
March 8, 2020

Added to the stresses we face; personal concerns, the climate crisis, the political season (it seems like it is always an election season), a polarized society, a polarized church, we have the coronavirus. On the news everyone is talking about it.

Most people would probably agree that whatever are the great concerns of their day, are the most serious and important issues anywhere, anytime. But these things are not really new, not that uncommon. They are common not in the sense that they happen to everyone, but that they have analogies to the past, are a grounded part of the human experience.

If the health experts turn out to be right, this new virus is coming our way and we will be affected by it. We will likely have decisions to make, perhaps to not shake hands, or canceling worship services or events, to not be around each other very much.

Nevertheless, it is not new, and Christianity has encountered epidemics as a fact of human history, and they don't really change the equation very much. Human life is precarious, that means it comes and goes on its own steam and without permission. An essential characteristic of the faith involve affinities for life and relationships.

As a matter of fact there are hints that in the early years when a virus would break out, an epidemic of some kind in some place, it could be very deadly. The need to quarantine the population led to isolation with no one to take care of the sick. One of Christianity's early successes is that in some cases, believers went to the sick at the risk of exposure, and gave them care, sometimes just giving them food and water.

This behavior risked the further spreading of the disease and potentially the death of the servant, but it also increased the number of survivors, some of whom would later become Christians, all because of the courage and the compassion shown in times of crisis.

I am not suggesting that a similar kind of crisis is coming our way, but just that we should endeavor to that kind of love and concern for others. Furthermore, war, poverty, disease are real and raise important issues for all of us. I wish I had, or knew someone who had better answers to these problems and more.

But even if we were to creatively solve all these challenges, life would still be precarious and we would still be vulnerable. Yet in is in these specific crisis moments that we learn about the crisis of life in general.

The Crisis

Conversely, it is the context of the general issues, mortality, sin, and meaning, that we face the particular circumstances of our own lives and the challenges that confront us. And it was the same for people when Jesus was around.

We are told that there was a man named Nicodemus, who came to Jesus late at night to avoid suspicion, for he was a member of the Jewish council. He asks no question, but merely acknowledges that Jesus is from God. We can be sure that Jesus knew about the news of the day. He knew about the distortions and injustices. And if there was a flu going around, he know about that too. What he said to Nicodemus was,

“I tell you the truth, no one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again.”

The Pharisee comically bungled his response. Jesus drew him from whatever the specific reasons for his visit may have been to the universal questions common to all people. He called it the Kingdom of God and spoke of the requirements of citizenship. In the ensuing verses we not only get a little clarification about what being “born again” means, but are also given the most quoted lines in the entire Bible, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.”

And there it is. No matter what one calls it, or what the nuances of interpretation may be, that is what we aiming for, eternal life, and the biggest threat we face

is the failure to achieve it. Things like being very sick or dying, things like moral failures, both individually and as a part of groups, are *all* secondary to the Grand Question, in the words of the rich young man of Matthew’s gospel; “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

And that is, of course, what we are meant to be thinking about during this Season of Lent. Given the circumstances, what should we do? What should I do? What should you do?

### The Verdict

We learn from this text something that is as important as anything in biblical faith. Jesus says according to verse 17, “I did not come to condemn the world, but to save.” And that is as loud an expression of the heart and essence of God, and there is in human language. It can be equaled but not surpassed.

It presupposes “Sin unto death,” but it proclaims the gospel news of eternal life instead. The verdict is, “guilty,” but the punishment deserved is assumed by God, who carries the burden. The only thing we are asked to do is to have faith in it, and to seek with God a relationship. It has very big implications for our lives.

It sets us free from anxiety. It doesn’t remove the reasons for anxiety, but takes away its heaviness. It also liberates us from the anger that strangles us, sometimes even when we are unaware. And it

diminishes the selfishness so common and centers our lives in Christ.

By removing anxiety from the center, we are set free to experience life as a wondrous gift, with joy and peace in the wings. It comes with responsibility, that is, we can no longer think of ourselves as being independent of others in a way that allows injustice to continue willy-nilly just because it does not hurt us too badly. I know it gets old hearing it, but the drumbeat of goodness beats on, we must nurture kindness, compassion, generosity, courage, honesty, integrity, honor . . .

And though we know that we cannot achieve on our own strength the good that we can imagine, we are assured that we are not without God's help. And though we know that every achievement is accompanied by negative side affects because in our humanity we are capable of destruction as well as creativity, we also know that we have been encountered by grace.

This encounter of grace means that we have been accepted by the one who gave us life, and is able to redeem us (as the 130th psalm says) from all this iniquity, can literally take our failures and transform them into miraculous successes.

There is a little Nicodemus in all of us, not wanting to give too much away we sneak around the periphery of faith looking for answers in the dark. In Christ the answer has taken hold of us. The verdict is in, we are

not condemned. May the grace of God apprehend you and spread among us like a virus, like a beautiful life-giving virus.

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