God So Loved the World

Pentecost 2 May 30, 2021

John 3: 1-17

This is a much loved and much despised passage by many. It is loved because of it’s loving message of God’s love and salvation for the world. It is despised because of how some have used it as a way to narrowly define what it means to be saved and Christian, such that it excludes. Jesus’ message was never meant to exclude or limit his salvation. His words describe divine intentionality and universality. God loves the world and wants to save everyone. Salvation touches all reaction, there are no limits, outsides or impediments to the ubiquitous and graceful providence of God. There is also some clarity that what Jesus is talking about is not about a decision we make. Scott Black Johnson, in The Lectionary Commentary, points out that “almost everything in John 3 conspires to make it clear that this business of getting born again is something with which we have very little to do. This is something that comes from God’s side of things and from the Spirit sovereign operation. Babies don’t decide to get born, they just GET born. Nor can babies decide that all things being equal, they’d prefer to stay in the womb. Nicodemus was right to suggest that this born-again thing sounded tricky, if not downright impossible, from the purely human side of things. We likely over-extend the image of getting born again if and when we make it too much about personal decisions and the like. This is an act of God for which we can but be eternally grateful!”

There is a story that I think illustrates this and has an intriguing element of mystery, about an Aboriginal Tribe and how they ‘got’ Jesus without any contact from the Christian Church. Tom Gleeson told this story to Megan Mckenna, author of We Live Inside a Story. Tom lived in Northwest Australia in 1992 and was told this story after asking locals how they got their Catholic faith.

‘Now that we know each other a bit, how come all you mob are Catholic?’ ‘ Oh that’s a good story, Nabii, you gotta ask Queenie’. Queenie is the Murrumburra (spiritual leaders) for the women. I went to Queenie and asked her. She said, ‘Oh that’s a good story Nabbii, you come and sit here and I will tell you.’ She explained that her dad was the head stockman on Texas Downs station. In the middle of the day, when the heat is oppressive the stockmen have a rest in the shade, her dad went to sleep and Queenie was playing on her mother’s lap when he started to sing in his sleep. Her mom told her to be quiet so she could listen to the song. When he woke, her dad said he had had a dream.

In the dream, a beautiful Lubra (aboriginal woman) gave birth to a boy: ‘When she ready she bin bringin’ him out and showin’ him me. He was a proper strong one, he had this brightest light all round him and there were animals there outside the cave, they were like dogs but they were not dogs’ (he actually dreamed sheep though he had never seen them). “Then she bin showin’ me a dance and teachin me a song to celebrate his birth.’ Her mum asked him, ‘What that song?’ As he tried to remember, she began to sing it and he joined in. When they finished they were both surprised to find they had a ‘cool feeling’ inside. ‘You got ‘im?’ ‘I got ‘im too!” ‘E proper strong one this one, maybe ‘e true?’ That night at corrobboree (ceremonial song and dance) he told the community of his dream. They all wanted to learn it so he taught them, and they all had the biggest surprise when they all felt that ‘cool feeling’ inside. For some years they continued this story every night and the sensation was always there. Then when Queenie was a young woman some of the people contracted leprosy. They were taken to a leprosarium where they stayed for three years. This place was at Beagle Bay, on the west coast and it was run by the John of God nuns. When the people arrived they saw these pictures of the baby Jesus in a crib, with a bright light around him and sheep. They said, ‘We got ‘im!’ The nuns were puzzled, how could these people from the bush ‘have’ Jesus? During their time there they told their story and learnt about Jesus. Old Winnine one-leg (she is still alive) was one of the original people who had gone to the leprosarium.

When the people returned to the Warmum they brought pictures of that baby Jesus with them and they told the story of Jesus. When they did this, the people again felt this ‘cool feeling’ inside. They were amazed: ‘He true one this one, how we get ‘im?’ The lepers suggested that maybe the priest could tell them and so two of them walked two hundred kilometers over some rugged country to ask the priest to come to their community. They all asked him how they could ‘get’ Jesus. He told them they would have to have the ‘water’ceremony. When you come into their country and you are going stay, and if you are properly disposed, they will welcome you with a water ceremony, so that the spirit of that country would recognize you. They were baptised and to this day they are ‘Aboriginal Catholics’. They are proper ‘two way’ people: Aboriginal and Catholic.

May we be grateful for the ways we experience and discover the divine in our lives and in one another, realizing that it is not because of our decision but because of God’s love and grace.