

Sermon preached at OCC, 10 March 2024

*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life! Help us now to hear and obey what you say to us today. Through Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

### **Light to life**

When we are in an intimate relationship with God, it leads us to life wherever we are. In *The Great Divorce*, written by C.S Lewis, the relationship with God is described poignantly. A group of people from the *Grey Town* stand on a very long cue waiting for a bus that will take them to a place for an excursion. As the name *Gray Town* indicates, it is a grim and joyless town where it rains continuously, even indoors. As they are waiting for the bus, arguments ensue among people, and some leave the cue in disgust. Finally, the bus arrives at the bus stop, and people get on the bus. The driver has a shiny face, but people can't see it. The bus leaves the Grey Town, and finally, they reach the place where everything – the grass, water and fields - is solid, heavy, and big. They find that they can't step on the grass as it hurts their feet, and are not solid enough like ghosts. The driver says they don't have to return to Grey Town if they don't want to. Among them, there's a woman who lost her son and has spent her life grieving over his death as he was murdered. Sometime later, certain people from the Holy Mountain walk towards them to guide them there.

The woman whose son was murdered is aghast when seeing her guide – the murderer himself!! The guide gently acknowledges her pain and agony. He says that when he accepted Christ Jesus as his saviour in prison, he repented all he had done, and God forgave him. He tells her he will guide her to the Holy Mountain to meet with the Holy One. But consumed by anger, she refuses and returns to the bus to go back to the Grey Town. Almost all ghosts choose to return to the grey town in the end, giving various reasons and excuses. The novel helps us ask who has condemned these people after all.

Today's readings deal with light, life, and condemnation, which are done through Christ Jesus, not through our efforts or merits. The reading in John is part of chapter 3, which begins when Nicodemus visits Jesus. It is night-time, and Nicodemus may want to see if Jesus is the Messiah. We don't know if Nicodemus overcomes the darkness in his life through this conversation with

Jesus. He reappears in John's gospel two times more – to speak up for fair judgment for Jesus<sup>1</sup> and to bring a mixture of myrrh and aloes after crucifixion.<sup>2</sup> The conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus offers us the basic elements of Christianity: the Son of Man being lifted up, eternal life and judgment. While we prefer to cite verse 3:16 - “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,” we don't seem to talk about the other two - the death on the cross and judgment or condemnation. But these three go together regarding God's love and eternal life, which are gifts from God. So, let's explore these dark sides – death on the cross and judgment first.

### ***The Darkness***

Biblical notions of death and life are quite different from the common sense in which death usually means physical death. When a person stops breathing and there are no vital signs in the body, we may declare them dead. The body would be quickly moved to a mortuary, and a funeral would be arranged. It may also be the end of a relationship with the family and friends, even though the memories with the person may continue. However, biblical concepts of death and life do not depend on our physical vitality but on our relationship with God.<sup>3</sup> That is, even if we die physically, this relationship continues.

Ephesians 2:1-3 depicts death and condemnation as humanity's helpless state through the three words: the corpse<sup>4</sup>, the slave,<sup>5</sup> and the condemned prisoner.<sup>6</sup> None of these seem to be examples of a good relationship with anyone, as they don't show any signs of happiness, freedom, or love. Each, in its own way, portrays a devastating, hopeless situation as 'you' or 'we' are powerless to change the status quo. They only have negative connotations of punishment and repression. In *the Great Divorce*, the woman who refused to go with the guide, who was once a murderer but is now redeemed by God, may belong to a state where no light can enlighten her to leave the darkness in her life. Jesus says that they are already condemned by leaving their relationship with God, who is the love that encompasses all. The Hebrew word for sin – *chata'ah* means 'missing the mark/goal. Here, the goal or mark is God or the godly life we are supposed to live today. But the light comes to us instead of our going/finding the light as if the bus is the only means for people to leave the Grey Town.

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<sup>1</sup> John 7:50

<sup>2</sup> John 19:39

<sup>3</sup> Mark 12:27

<sup>4</sup> 'dead through the trespasses and sins' in v1

<sup>5</sup> 'following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air' in v2

<sup>6</sup> 'children of wrath in v3

### *The Light*

John 3:14-21 depicts how the light comes into the world in the darkness, although the world does not recognise it. But how do we have this ‘light’, or what does ‘believing in him’ mean? In *The Great Divorce*, people find that their bodies are not solid but transparent, and the other objects in that place are too big and solid, so they can’t walk on the grass properly. But as time passes, those who decide to remain there and go with the guide to the Holy Mountain experience their bodies changing slowly. As trust in that place builds up, so are their bodies actualised. Jesus describes those who believe in him will receive ‘eternal life’, which doesn’t simply refer to the quantity of life. In some contexts, eternal life may refer to the length of life when we drop the idea of physical death but allow God’s infinite love into our lives. As in Mark 12:27, God is not of the dead but of the living. When we truly live in God’s life in the present,<sup>7</sup> we live the eternal life in Christ, who has life in himself.<sup>8</sup>

The light leads us to eternal life, and only active belief enables us to overcome the concepts of life, death and judgment/condemnation based on the physical existence in this world. The Son’s coming to the world means a new relationship with God has already begun, reconfiguring life beyond death. In *The Great Divorce*, we find words as concluding remarks.

“There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, “Thy will be done,” and those to whom God says, in the end, “Thy will be done.” All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice, there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. Those who knock, it is opened.”<sup>9</sup> Amen!

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<sup>7</sup> John 6:54-55

<sup>8</sup> John 5:26

<sup>9</sup> *The Great Divorce* by C S Lewis