

Rinze Ijbema - John 3, 16.

My heart longs to see the Lord. I often find myself asking God to show Himself, to make Himself known to us, to make clear to us what He wants and where He is to find. And many times God answers my prayers. I can see Him in his creation, all the wonderful things He has made, his handiwork. I can hear his voice, the voice of the Good Shepherd, in the gospel, in the Bible. And I can feel his presence whenever brothers and sisters open up to God and to each other. So many times I experience his presence.

And sometimes, maybe even many times, I wonder where He is. Sometimes I am unable to reach out to the heart of my brother or sister and we seem not to understand each other and I wonder why the Lord doesn't help us. Sometimes I read the Gospel, and I still appreciate it as the Word of God, but I'm in doubt how it applies to me or to us today. And I love God's creation, but when so many things go wrong, with chaos and hunger and hate all around the world, I'm left wondering. My heart longs to see the Lord. Where is He?

Look for love, is the answer of John the evangelist. If sometimes you find the Bible a book that is hard to read, try reading the Gospel of John. The Bible is an old book, coming from another time and place, but the Gospel of John is able to cross the gaps of time and space. Why? Because the Gospel of John is the Gospel of love. And the heart of this Gospel is John 3, 16: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.' Look for love, when you're seriously looking for God.

There is something new in this Gospel of John. Look around you and pay attention to all the gods that people make for themselves. Back then, here in Europe, we worshipped the powers of nature, our Gods were personified thunderstorms, we took the sun and the stars for our gods. And today, in Europe, our idols are wealth, our money, and health, our bodies. Not love. Even within the Bible, in the Old Testament, there is a strong sense that God is and was and has always been love, but how deep the love of God could be and how strong it would be in the end, Israel didn't even realize.

At the same time, the core message of John that God is love, is a message which everyone who takes it to heart will recognize as an answer to our deepest and oldest desires. This is the answer we were hoping for, without even knowing it. Of course wealth and power and health are helping us to survive, are stimulating us to keep going. But they cannot help us reach our goal, they cannot fulfill the deep desires of our hearts. The desire to be loved, the longing to belong, to be seen as we are and to be loved for who we are. How come we did not think of this ourselves? John is so right.

At this point it is good to remind ourselves that God so loved the world. Sometimes, when it comes to religion, we are happy to limit what we call the spiritual to the soul. If it's well with my soul all is well. But the Gospel of John doesn't say, 'for God so loved our souls.' It says, 'for God so loved the world.' Don't worry, the world includes you and your soul. But it includes a lot more. It includes your heart and your will and your body, it includes your brothers and sisters and family. It includes your school and your town and your country. God so loved the world.

What does this mean? For God to love the world means that He embraces his creation, with everything in it. If you're an artist, a painter, or a writer, and what you make does not work out the way you want it, what do you do? You can tear it to pieces, you can throw it away, you can burn it the next day when you find out it is all wrong. We are God's artwork. Unlike a sculpture or a symphony, we have a mind of our own. We ruined God's creation overnight and ourselves with it, and we keep on keeping it away from the Lord. God doesn't throw away anything. He embraces the world and He embraces you with it. Why is that? Ask God. Apparently He put too much of Himself in the whole project, to abandon it. Apparently He put too much of Himself in you, to let you fall. So He embraces you and the whole world you live in.

'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son.' Enter God's Son. Please do realize that God considers all of us to be his family. To many people today, God is a total stranger. And all of us, from time to time, may find ourselves alienated from Him. We long to see Him, but where is He? From God's perspective, we're all in the family. We may behave like estranged family. We may act like wayward sons and daughters. But we're family. And there's something about being a family, being daughters and sons of the Almighty one. It means He doesn't want to lose you.

Enter God's Son. God's one and only Son. What is so unique about Him? He is unique, compared to us, in that we were created by God and given life by God, whereas He has always been the heart of God and has shared in God's life from before time was even made. But the day He was born from the virgin Mary, He became one of us. The Son of God became our brother. But then something unique happens. We had estranged ourselves from God. But God comes back to love us. To reconnect, He becomes one of us, so that we can be his family again.

John says, 'For God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son.' This act of giving has two sides to it. The first part of this act of giving is the part of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, becoming one of us to live with us and to share with us and to show God to us. God's deepest answer to where He is and what He wants of us, you find in what Jesus Christ has said and done. I am well aware of the questions we have for the Lord. We long to see his face, to hear his voice, and to experience his presence. His deepest answer to our needs is Jesus Christ, and all He has said and done, to show to us the love of God and how He embraces the world and us with it.

The second part of God's act of giving his Son is the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. It's very important that in this act of giving, God gave Himself. Of course there is God and there is Jesus Christ, the Father and the Son. But whoever has seen the Son has seen God Himself. In Him, God gave Himself to us. He was at the very heart of God, 'begotten of the Father before all ages; God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God; begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father.' In Him, God offers Himself to us. In Him, God shows to us what it means for Him, that He still sees us as part of his family, as his daughters and his sons.

'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.' What does it mean to believe in the Son? Okay, imagine this. You are sad and someone, a friend or one of your parents, comes to you and gives you a bear hug, embracing you with all their love. What is the only natural or even possible response to such a hug? To fold your own arms around them and to feel the comfort of their presence and to cry and to laugh. This is faith, the only natural or actually possible answer to the love of God. When the Eternal One embraces you, what else can you do than to return the favour and feel the comfort of his presence and cry and laugh?

According to Jesus, this is a matter of life and death. To be or not to be. 'Whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.' Not to respond to his embrace means to ignore Him. Before you know it you stop looking for Him. This is the way to miss Him completely in the end. As you will understand by know, this is not the desire of the Lord. He wants to find you and He wants you to find Him. Believe me, only in finding Him will you truly find yourself. The One who made you and who knows every inch and fibre of your life, in Him and in his love alone you'll truly become and be who you were meant to be.

'Whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.' Again, we may picture this eternal life in a way that is actually uber-spiritual. Eternal life is, again, not a matter of the soul or of the soul alone. Eternal life is life 2.0, the new release of life as it was meant to be. All the bugs and all the chaos, all the hunger and the hate, will be removed by God himself. And this will last forever, no doubts about that. But you can find that life today, embraced by the love of God, it is here for you to enjoy.

Amen.