

## **Show us the Father**

### **Holiness and love, but first the judgment**

Reading: Psalm 96:9-13; John 3:17-21, 9:35-41

#### **Resume:**

I have talked about authority a couple of weeks ago. Just a few days ago, there was a write up in the Advertiser referring to the tantrums of the little ones in school and kindergarten. It carried this caption, 'Number of Reception, Year 1 students suspended in SA schools doubles.' The news bulletin followed. The little ones have never been set any boundaries and hence their behaviour in schools. We have seen that authority and holiness are linked not to power but to redemption.

Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. He also came to show us the Father. Jesus addressed His Father as Holy Father. He did not say loving Father. Furthermore, when He taught us to pray, He said, 'Our Father in heaven, holy is your name'. The name is important as it sums up all that we are. While we affirm that God is love, His primary nature is holy. Holiness should not be seen as something that God has, like one of His property or attributes. No, holiness is what God is. It is also not something that He gives to us. We are only holy in so far as we are in union with God and not otherwise. Holiness is not something that we can have in our own right. Once we are apart from God we cease to be holy. Holiness is what God does to us, and not what we do to attain to holiness.

To know the Father is to know Jesus, the Son. Jesus has come to reveal the Father. To know the Father is a relational matter. It is not simply having information or data about Him. If we claim to be the children of God, then God is our Father. We cannot claim to be children of God unless first of all the Father takes us in. That is quite obvious. Children cannot demand to be adopted into a family. That can only come about because the parents will it. We need to recognise this authority, i.e. the authority of the parents. This is the authority parents have to incorporate the children into the family. Our heavenly Father does it through our incorporation into the body of the human Christ by the Spirit. Here we see the Trinitarian action in redemption.

God's fatherhood has been a much neglected consideration in theology until the last fifty years or so. True, God as Father is enshrined in doctrine but not much is understood in terms of the outworking in life. The consideration in theology was largely Christological until the Spirit's movement a hundred years ago. Having said that, we need to acknowledge the writings of John Calvin in his Trinitarian exposition of theology.

#### **Holiness and Love, but first the Judgment.**

That is an unusual heading. We don't normally think that way, but I'll explain as I go along. I had earlier thought I would deal with holiness and love first and then leave holiness and judgment to the last. I thought it expedient to do so as people do not like hearing a sermon on judgment. Since then, I have come to realise that we need to shoot straight.

We were at the Vatican in Rome many years ago and a visit to the Cistine Chapel is a must. Of course the famous painting there is the one titled, 'The Last Judgment'. While we were standing there viewing the work of art, various people walked past and expressed their hatred for such a painting. Their objection was not that the painting is not good enough, but the objection was

against the theme that was painted. They simply hated the idea of a judgment. How could a God who claims to be loving decree such a judgment? They cannot hold together love and judgment as an integral whole. We have a much weakened view of love.

We have come to understand love without coming through the holiness of God. We may talk of *agape*, but often that idea is still very much rooted in *eros* or *philos*, i.e. our humanistic understanding of love. Holiness involves judgment. In fact the very first outflow of holiness is judgment and not love. The holiness of God cannot co-exist with sin and rebellion. There has to be judgment and it is in the rightful understanding of judgment that we can fully appreciate the love of God. Love without judgment is either *philos* or *eros*. *Agape* involves judgment whether we like it or not. This is because *agape* flows out to a sinful humanity. It is costly love. If we deny the judgment of *agape*, then we deny the love of God and the presence of sin in us.

Let me explain. I see my child playing with matches and fire. I see something wrong. We may call that sin. We have to. I love my child and I intervene. I make a judgment and call a halt to that. I may give a command and say, 'Stop that'. I may also physically intervene and pull the child or the hand away. That may bring about a positive response, meaning the child pulls away and accepts the warning, i.e. the judgment. On the other hand, the child may stubbornly refuse and continue with the matches. When that happens, I can do one of two things. One is to grab the child and give the child a good spanking. The other is to let the child continue to do so. Then one of two things can happen. The child may get burnt or may get away without getting hurt.

Can we begin to see that my love of the child who is obviously sinful must first of all start with judgment? If I don't, then is that truly love? The child may never realise that the action is wrong and will continue to repeat it. The child would not be helped at all. What good would it be for the child if I were to say, 'That is alright but just be careful and don't get burnt'? The child will never learn. It is like the advertisement that we are getting nowadays. One goes like this. If you buy our products, then you can eat as much as you like and you won't put on weight. Obviously that sells. If not they won't be spending thousands of dollars for the advertisement. That advertisement is not true. There is no judgment on the eating habits. The customer is always right. Any judgment on the customer is bad business. That is our world today.

Judgment is an essential part of *agape* love when dealing with sinful humanity. It is the first expression of love. We cannot separate judgment and redemption. This separation has done irreparable harm to Christianity. The psalmist appreciated this.

<sup>11</sup> Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;  
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;  
<sup>12</sup> let the field exult, and everything in it.  
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy  
<sup>13</sup> before the LORD; for he is coming,  
for he is coming to judge the earth.  
He will judge the world with righteousness,  
and the peoples with his truth. (Psalm 96:11-13)

Very often, when we say that Jesus came to seek and to save that which is lost, we draw a straight line to love. Now that is not so. That line has to pass through judgment. This is what I mean when I say that we need to know the Father. Otherwise we will interpret the actions of God according to our understanding. It would be like the child accusing the parents to be unloving when he or she is denied another lolly or ice cream, or not being allowed to play with matches. Compare these two statements regarding the coming of Jesus.

Holy love and Judgment

For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost. (Luke 19:10)

And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, ... (John 3:19)

Yes, Jesus came to save the lost, but that coming also involves judgment. That is why we need to come to love through judgment. That is the proper pathway of holy love.

### **Judgement is restoration, not retribution**

We also need to see that this judgment is not retribution, but restoration. This is an important distinction. We mostly see judgment as retribution because of our contractual way of thinking, but when we can see judgment as restoration, we come to see it as the outflow of the grace and love of the Father. It then opens up a whole new area of understanding and appreciation. We come to love the judgment of the Father. This is no mere theory. It actually happens.

Is it too much to teach a child to say thank you for the judgement? Is this not the working out of the theology that we have been talking about here? We need to acknowledge the judgment of God. If we do not want to come under the judgment of God, then we put God under our judgement – the created judging the Creator!! How obscene!

The judgment of God is because of His holy love for us. Our sinful nature has to be judged before it can be restored. The gangrene has to be excised before healing can take place. It is His mercy towards us. We sang this hymn, 'In love and in grace', and the chorus repeatedly.

O greatest of wonders and deepest of joys  
That I, a child of wrath became a child of God  
In His own loving choice;  
In Christ upon His Cross the judgement went through;  
On Him I have believed, forgiveness have received;  
Behold I am made new.

This song has linked love and grace with judgment, and this is absolutely vital. But there is still a problem with us. We think that the judgment went through in Christ and we got off the judgment. That is not the sense of the song. We are one with Christ. He has come to take our humanity into His. We have been judged on the cross together with Christ. We have died with Him and it is only after that that we have the new life in Him.

We want to come to a loving Father through a Christ without a cross. That wouldn't do. We need to come to the Holy Father through Christ on the cross. That equates with judgment because our judgment was made on the cross. We died with Christ. He is not just our substitute. We are identified with Christ and therefore the judgement. That is the way to see the love of the Holy Father.

In many of the testimonies of people coming to Christ, not often do you hear them talking about judgment and repentance. If we do not accept the judgment of God and repent of our ways, then who is the god that you are worshipping? If we insist that it is the Father of Jesus Christ, then where is the cross and the judgment. We have sung these words. 'We have not been knowing the voice of the Father. The judgments that come are the judgments of mercy. The judgment of God now releases us from judgment.'

## Holiness and Love

This brings us to the consideration of holiness and love. I want to begin by quoting to you a statement by John Webster.

Thus: the holiness which God is *in se* is active in the election and purification of a people for himself, and the love of the triune persons abounds as loving mercy towards ruined creatures.<sup>1</sup>

Holiness and love of God is not simply all about God. I have pointed out that a doctrine of God which is only a doctrine of God is not a doctrine of God. God has created humanity in His own image. What that means is that the Triune God has the capacity to include humanity and indeed He has in the incarnation of Jesus. The Son of God has become man and that has become permanent. That is why a doctrine of God must include humanity because there is now a man in heaven in the Triune communion. Therefore the consideration of the holiness and love of God must include sinful humanity. Holiness understood in abstraction from who God is and His covenantal relationship with His creation is not holiness. It is mere philosophy and has nothing to do with theology, i.e. who God is. The problem with us is that we have an idea of holiness that is non-relational and that is mere philosophy. The holiness of God engages His creation.

Secondly, we do not determine what holiness is. Holiness is what God is and how holiness is to be expressed is determined by God Himself. It is easy for us to hurl around the saying that God is holy but how is that holiness expressed? The problem with us is that we have determined in our minds what a holy God should be. We have equated holiness with moral perfection, i.e. sinlessness. That is part of what holiness is, but if we simply stop there, then that is not a doctrine of God because it does not connect with humanity, and indeed sinful humanity. Therefore we have become judgmental in the wrong sense. Thus, 'the holiness which God is *in se* is active in the election and purification of a people for himself, and the love of the triune persons abounds as loving mercy towards ruined creatures'.

The holiness of God is not merely moral perfection. It is expressed in His election and purification of a people for Himself. This holiness is expressed in the love of the Triune Godhead in mercy towards ruined creatures.

Is God holy when He continued to bless Abraham despite the errors that he made? Is God holy when He continued to keep David on the throne of Israel despite his many errors? When we see holiness simply as moral perfection, then we put ourselves in an ethical dilemma in these narratives. How would our morality today deal with Abraham and David? Is there a contradiction between holiness and love? If God is holy and by that we take it to mean that He is morally perfect, then how could He put up with His chosen people like Abraham and David, both of whom failed so miserably? There is more to mere moral perfection in holiness. It is true that God is morally perfect but that moral perfection is expressed in the outflow of love and grace to His creation. Moral perfection all by itself is sterile. Holiness that does not flow out in love to restore is not holiness. Love which does not come through holiness is not love. It is cheap love. The holy love of God comes to us through judgment and thus restores us. What we have today is a love that sweeps judgment under the carpet. As a result there is no restoration to the truth and the problems present again and again. What we do then is to use more and more bandaids. What is needed is surgery when the cancer is excised and the wound stitched up. That is painful, but unless that is done there will be no healing.

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<sup>1</sup> J Webster, Holiness and Love, *SJT* 57(3): 249–268 (2004)

This has not been an easy paper to prepare because I see myself in the same category as Abraham and David. However, I take comfort from Paul who called himself 'the chief of sinners' while penning those words from 1 Corinthians 13. It is in putting this question that we expose the error of our understanding, i.e. in understanding holiness merely as moral perfection. It is not the case of a sinner talking about love - that would be hypocritical - but a redeemed sinner talking about love. It is not even a philosopher who understands love and talks about it. That would be mere theory. It is the case of a sinner who has tasted the holy love of God and starts to talk about it. You must have heard the expression that what we are doing is simply a beggar telling another beggar where to find bread. There are two quotations that I want to present to you. They express the same idea in different ways.

The holiness of the triune God is not only the infinity and integral perfection of his being, but also that infinity and perfection in its turning to the creature. Holiness is manifest and operative in God's loving works of relating to the creature, taking up its cause and sanctifying it for life with himself.<sup>2</sup>

God's holiness is present as the active love in which he comes to the aid of his people, taking up their cause, bearing their sin, purifying them and binding them to his own life.<sup>3</sup>

It is only in this understanding that we can see that love is covenantal and not contractual. Then only can we begin to see why Jesus taught thus.

<sup>43</sup> "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' <sup>44</sup> But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. <sup>46</sup> For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? <sup>47</sup> And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? <sup>48</sup> Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:43-48)

We are to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. He is Holy Father. Our perfection is not the result of what we do. 'Be perfect' is in passive voice as always. It is what the Triune God does to us. It is the Holy Father coming in love to us to judge us and therefore restores us. He takes us into Himself and that is our perfection. It is only as this has been done to us that we express our love to our neighbour and to those who hate us. Returning a dinner to someone who has taken us out for dinner brings us no credit. Neither do we take someone out for dinner expecting a dinner in return. God had come to us in covenant love not contractual love. In so doing He changes us. That is the miracle of love as Forsyth says.

What I mean is that we make too little of the Father when we do not rise beyond *love to grace*—which is holy love, suffering hate and redeeming it. The true supernatural is not the miraculous, but the miracle for whose sake miracles exist. It is not prodigy in nature but the grace of God in history. It has no direct relation to natural law. Miracle is not a scientific idea but a religious. An event is a miracle not by its relation to law but to grace. The Incarnation would be equally a miracle, however Jesus entered the world. It is not nature that is the true region of the supernatural, but history; and history not as a chain of events, but as the spiritual career of the soul or of the race. That is the true region of the supernatural. It lies in the action of God's will upon men's wills, not upon natural law. It is the work of God's grace upon men's sin.<sup>4</sup>

We have already said enough about the judgment of love. The problem we see in the saga of child abuse in churches is that there is love for the offender but without the judgment. What we are seeing today is the judgment that should have taken place in love in the past, and measures put in place for the restoration of the offender. Love without judgment cannot restore because

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<sup>2</sup> J Webster, Holiness and Love, *SJT* 57(3): 259 (2004)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *God the Holy Father*, (NCPI, ) p. 7.

there is no repentance for the wrong that was done. Repentance is not so much for God as for the offender. It is the Spirit that will lead the offender to the point of repentance, and hence the restoration. That is the process that must take place. That is the miracle of grace.

What is so difficult about turning water into wine or lead into gold. We call that a miracle. It is simply a matter of chemistry. With the right accelerator (particle accelerator) that could be done. It is only a matter of getting a machine with the capacity to produce sufficient energy to blast away a few protons in the nucleus of a metal to change its property. Our scientists can do that, but the cost of doing that is much much more than mining the mineral. However, to capture and to change the will of a person is no mere chemistry. It is an act of divine grace. That is the true miracle. As Forsyth says, a miracle is not a change in the natural law. Miracles do not belong to nature but to theology. It is God binding Himself to humanity through the cross and transforming humanity in the process. The problem with us is that we refuse the judgment of God and therefore remained unrestored to the Triune communion. Therein lies the cause of our struggles.

Again let me say that we cannot work from our notion of holiness and love and project that onto the Triune God. We need to work from top down. There is nothing in the created universe that comes close to the holiness and love of the Father. We are not able nor should we be allowed to use what is created to explain the Creator. Scripture makes that clear.

“There is no Holy One like the LORD,  
no one besides you;  
there is no Rock like our God. (1 Samuel 2:2)

There is **none** like you among the gods, O Lord, nor are there any works like yours. (Psalm 86:8)

There is **none** like you, O Lord; you are great, and your name is great in might. (Jeremiah 10:6)

Even our expressions of holiness and love do not come close to that of God. That is not to say that we do not try, and no matter how hard we try, it is only a poor reflection of the love of God. All that remains for us is to confess the holiness and love of God. It is as we acknowledge and confess who God is, that confession will rise as holy incense to the Father through our Saviour Jesus Christ.

### **Holiness and the Cross**

Where is the Holy Father when Jesus was on the cross? That is quite an unusual question to ask. We need to ask the question because there are two answers to it. One answer says that the Father turned His face against the Son because Jesus was viewed as a sinner and the full wrath of the Father was taken by the Son. From this we view the Father as an angry God who needed His pound of flesh and took it out on His Son, and with the same breath, we say that that is because He loved us. I find this difficult to hold together. We also developed a kind of substitution thinking. What this means is that Jesus suffered in our place and was judged a sinner. He paid the penalty and we don't have to go through all that. Well, that is true in part. This kind of thinking does not help us to be identified with Jesus on the cross. There is a sense in which we died with Him on the cross as Paul says.

<sup>19</sup>For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; <sup>20</sup>and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal. 2:19-20)

This sense is also well captured in this hymn.

Holy love and Judgment

There I was drawn to Him  
On that dread tree.  
The curse He suffered there  
Was due to me.  
In Him my judgment came:  
In Him I died.  
I on that cross with Him  
Was crucified. (M. Bleby)

Yes, it is true that Jesus died for us, but to treat Him merely as my substitute does not acknowledge His common humanity with us and our identification with Him. Where there is no death, there is no resurrection and new life. If we were not part of the cross then we have no part in the resurrected Christ who will come again in glory.

The other says that the Father was there with the Son on the cross. In what sense was He there? Did the Father also suffer with the Son? That would be unthinkable.

Yes, it is the will of the Father that His Son should go to the cross. That also blows our minds. What love! Which father on earth would do that? The Father God did. It is His unsurpassable holiness in action. How are we to understand the cross? The mystery of the cross is like an iceberg. We see only very little on the surface that is available for us to see and to understand. Most of it is under the surface and we cannot see that. Maybe with an echo we might know that it is there. Where can we find this echo to tell us?

The gospels did not quite explain to us about the cross. Jesus did not explain to us what His mission is all about apart from stating it very briefly that He came to do the will of the Father. It was left to the disciples to explain it. He came to do the will of the Father. The rest of humanity does not need to understand it, and in truth we do not have the capacity to do so. Jesus had to do it and when it was all done, the Spirit came and made that work real in the lives of the disciples. Now people like Peter, John and Paul experienced the reality of that salvation through the Spirit and they confessed the reality of that experience. They confessed the reality of the cross. That was the miracle that God did in their hearts by capturing their wills, transforming their wills and conforming their wills to His. That is why we were taught to pray, 'your will be done on earth as it is in heaven'. It is only after that has happened to us that we come to see something of the wonder of that salvation.

The problem with us today is that we want to come to God with our clever IQ seeking to unravel the mystery of the cross. That IQ is not sufficient not even if it were 500 plus, if that was at all possible. We need a holy IQ whatever that might be, and that is a mind that has been made holy through the cross and Pentecost. I am not here to explain the cross but merely to tell you about the miracle that took place at Calvary. I do not know all about it but this much I know because it was told to me by the apostles in the scriptures and I have experienced it. Our minds can only be made holy by the truth of God's words and that is where we start. Jesus prayed,

Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. (John 17:7)

Not only do we need our minds to be made holy, but the entirety of our being needs to be made holy in order for us to come into the reality of the communion with the Father.

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Thess. 5:23)



There is a mystery to the cross and we need not be too concerned about it. Even if it were to be explained to us in some detail, we would not have the capacity to hold it. It would completely blow our brains out! That is why Jesus said,

<sup>12</sup> "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. <sup>13</sup> When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. <sup>14</sup> He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. <sup>15</sup> All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (John 16:12-15)

These are the words of Jesus. It is simply not possible for us to comprehend the truth of what God has done without the Spirit of God working within us. The knowledge of the Holy Father requires holy minds and there is no holy mind without the Holy Spirit capturing our will and transforming it. That is the true miracle of Calvary. The coming of the Son of God into our world and His suffering on the cross made that a reality for us. So the writer to the Hebrews said.

Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood. (Heb. 13:12)

The Holy Father is coming to us not asking us to do anything to be holy like Him. He has done it through His Son on the cross. He wants us to acknowledge His Son and all that He has done for us. As we have been saying, holiness is not what we do, but what has been done to us. Do not try to explain the cross with some simplistic notions derived from our sinful humanity and culture. The cross is a mystery of the Holy Three, i.e. Father, Son and Spirit, as this song sums it up for us.

2. The Father gives Him up to die;  
The Spirit stands not idle by  
But aids the Son to sacrifice  
For sin's impure and cruel vice.  
That hour of the Holy Three  
Brings love to all humanity.  
The heart of God was fully bared  
As Christ no shame and pain was spared. (G. Bingham, *NCHB* 302)

The work of the cross is the work of the Holy Three, Father, son and Spirit. It is the Father's will carried out by the Son and made real to us by the Spirit. It is as all Three combine that the cross yields it meaning and truth to us.

<sup>14</sup> how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God! (Heb. 9:14)

It is then that we offer up true worship to the Father God, when our minds and conscience are made pure by what has been done to us by the blood of Christ. That is the new life in the Spirit.

<sup>19</sup> ... I have been crucified with Christ; <sup>20</sup> and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal. 2:19-20)