

John 15:18-16:4

Why the world hates Christians?

Baptisms are meant to be occasions of joy and celebration. They are a sign of entry into a new community, a symbol given by Jesus Christ of resurrection and eternal life...

Which might make our reading for this afternoon seem more than a little unfortunate with all its talk of hatred, persecution, the world and death!

I could defend it by saying that it's just where we happened to be up to in John's gospel and that someone else choose the passages so we'll just have to make do with it, even if something else would have been more... well more baptismal!

But I'm not going to do that. In fact, this week as I've looked at this passage, I think that it's absolutely brilliantly appropriate for a service of baptism and that if I had chosen a passage specifically for the occasion there are few better places in the Bible I could have gone.

In fact the only thing I'm sorry about is that we're very tight for time so I'm going to be limited in my ability to show you just how brilliant a passage this is for the guys who are about to be submerged and for all of us listening – whether you're here today as someone who would call yourself a Christian or not.

This account of the teachings of Jesus in his very last hour with his disciples was written by his closest earthly friend, the apostle John.

It's part of a much larger set of teaching that takes up 5 chapters, almost twenty percent, of John's biography of the life of Jesus.

And through all these chapters Jesus is preparing the disciples for what it will be like to be followers of Jesus in a world where he is no longer physically present.

Which, of course, is exactly the world that we live in – so it's good for us to hear about it from Jesus himself!

And in this section we learn two things which add up to tell us why the world hates Christians...

1 The world hates Jesus because he tells people they are wicked

Now as soon as you say that the world hates Jesus people are likely to accuse you of having a persecution complex!

Surely the world doesn't hate Jesus? There are church buildings on every street corner. There are programmes about him on the TV all the time. His words are quoted approvingly by people of all religions and none. Even Christian writers seem to recognize that people are quite keen on Jesus – hence the title of a book I was reading reviews of last night called *"They like Jesus – but they don't like the church."*

Well I grant you that when most people in our country think of Jesus they don't immediately boil over into a rage and start foaming at the corners of their mouth.

But if we are to take Jesus' own words seriously (and, of course, not taking them seriously is a sign that we have, at least, contempt for Jesus) then we need to accept that the world does hate him – v18 – they hated me first. V23 – he who hates me.

So where, then, is the evidence that what Jesus is saying here is actually true?

Well the most obvious place to look for it is in the following chapters of John's gospel.

If you read the rest of the story you'll see that in a few short hours Jesus will be arrested, punched in the face, flogged, insulted, mocked, declared innocent and then killed anyway in the most barbaric way known to mankind at that time to the approving roars of the religious establishment, the bloodthirsty gloating of the crowd and the silent satisfaction of the Roman government.

Jesus isn't saying that everybody hates him in the most violent way possible all the time. Just a few days earlier he had been welcomed into the city of Jerusalem by cheering crowds who thought he was going to violently overthrow the waiting government.

What Jesus is saying is that the better people understand what he is about. The more they understand what he is saying. The clearer they perceive his message the less they like him.

He's already summed it up earlier in John's gospel with these words: "the world hates me because I testify that what it does is evil."

The essence of the message of Jesus is that human beings, the world, are lost and in rebellion against God. We are under wrath and judgment and there is no way to escape eternal punishment other than by putting our hope and trust in Jesus.

That is the message that people hate. And the more clearly it is spoken the more people hate it.

That's what Jesus is talking about in v22 – *"If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin. Now, however, they have no excuse for their sin."*

Jesus isn't saying that people were completely innocent before he came – the whole point of his mission is that without him we were morally lost and in darkness.

Rather Jesus is saying that the more light from God is revealed the deeper our darkness becomes and the more guilty we are if we refuse to step into that light.

Jesus offers us, v24, amazing signs and miracles to demonstrate that he is the very Son of God. The perfect and complete image of God made visible in our world.

But the history of his time, and of the world since, is that we refuse to put our trust in him, in fact we actively turn against him, because we don't like what he says about us.

We can deal with a mystical Jesus: a Jesus who doesn't really say anything but stands as a sort of symbol for a cosmic spirituality – there is something more to life and you've just got to find it in your own authentic way. That's the Jesus of the new age movement.

We can deal with a moral Jesus: a Jesus who says that we're basically on the right track but we've got to try a little bit harder to be nice to people, not steal and live respectable middle-class lives. That's the Jesus of traditional religion.

What we can't deal with is the real Jesus. The Jesus of history. The Jesus who says that we are each, individually, so wicked that the only thing we can do to be right with God is die and start again. That the only way we can do that is by being joined to

him by trusting in his death for us. That the whole orientation of our lives, not just a few moral standards, is fundamentally wrong. That what we need is a whole new life – the kind symbolised here today by people being buried under water in death and then raised to new life.

Sure in our society Jesus isn't hated as much as he might be in some places. But who else's name is used as much as a curse?

And what sort of a response is there when it is suggested that we should adopt Jesus' standards in regard to sex, divorce, abortion, caring for immigrants or the relief of poverty? I've been in some of those discussions and I can tell you that people hate the things that Jesus says.

The bottom line is that even though we know, or ought to know, that Jesus has come to offer a permanent and perfect solution to our wickedness we don't want it – because we don't want to admit we have a problem in the first place.

We don't want to think that we have so alienated ourselves from God that there is no possible thing we can do to make it right. Because that is an admission of the most important failure you can have in the universe. So we reject Jesus and his words.

And just as the world hates Jesus so...

2 The world hates Christians because they speak about Jesus

Now I reckon I'm on slightly safer ground here.

After all the abuse and hatred of Christians, solely on the grounds of their belief, is well documented over the centuries and around the world even now.

From Nero's persecutions in the first century to the beheading of converts to Christianity in Saudi Arabia today there is a long history of followers of Jesus having their faith wrongly identified out as seditious and dangerous to the state and being burned to death, hung, shot or disposed of in any one of a number of grizzly ways.

But surely, you'll say, the world doesn't hate every Christian all the time? After all for most Christians in the world, most of the time, life is peaceful. And even in strongly anti-Christian cultures and times lots of Christians get by without being actively hunted down?

And that's true – up to a point. Often it's simply not in the self-interest of people who have a real problem with the Christian faith to do violence to Christians.

And very often people aren't clear enough about exactly what it is the Christians believe to actually ignite their hatred. That's particularly true in our culture where most people still basically think that being a Christian is about a couple of hours a week at church and trying to be a bit nicer.

But I think that the more people understand what Jesus is really all about. The more they understand what Christians actually believe the more active and clear is people's hatred.

If you get that Christians are saying that there is nothing in anybody's life that is acceptable to God in any way. If you understand that Jesus says that every other system of religion and thought is a wicked idolatry that will take you only to judgment. If you see that Jesus says only making him your king and turning all the values of your life upside down can rescue you. And if you comprehend that you cannot do that by yourself but only by throwing yourself on Jesus for undeserved mercy. If you really understand those things then you will either embrace the Christian gospel and follow Jesus and become one of his people.

Or you will hate and despise the message and, therefore, the people who bring it.

Those people might be your children or your friends. But if you really understand what they believe, what Jesus teaches, your relationship with them will never be quite the same again.

PAUSE

So, Christian...

If you are one of those getting baptised here this afternoon you need to know the future Jesus says awaits you.

He promises to protect you to the end.

He promises that you will be with him forever.

But he also promises that to be a Christian who, together with the Spirit of God, v26, testifies, speaks about, who Jesus is and his message, is

inevitably to face hatred. It can come in many forms. But it will come.

And he tells you this, 4:1, so that when it does come. Even, 4:2, when it is so bad that people think that they are serving their god by putting you to death, you won't be surprised.

Because that's what happened to Jesus. And no servant is greater than his master.

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May 2008*