

## 1.

It might be insightful, sometime later, for you to see *how many verses or phrases from the Bible* you can quote from memory. And I suspect that, even if you cannot easily quote an entire verse, you probably have more biblical phrases tucked away in your mind than you realize:

- “In the beginning, God created...”
- “Thou shalt not...”
- “The Lord is my shepherd...”
- “Love the Lord your God with all your heart...”
- “Blessed are the poor in spirit...”
- “Our Father, who art in heaven...”
- “Do not let your hearts be troubled...”

And perhaps somewhere in your list might be: “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.” Or, perhaps you remember John 3:16 better in the words of the King James Version: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him, should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

It is valuable to have parts of the Bible tucked away within ourselves like that. If you grew up in a more Protestant denomination then you may have experienced, as a youth, “Bible drills” where memorizing verses from the Bible was expected. Or if you have otherwise attended church a lot, then the repeated hearing of scripture read aloud can have a way of making its home in us even without us quite realizing it.

So, another interesting question related to this could be: If for some reason—an emergency health crisis, loss of eyesight or hearing, or an apocalypse—you then had no access to digital devices or paper copies of the Bible, would there be enough of the words of the Bible *in you*...to be able to be called to mind to sustain you or someone close to you?

*Words* seem especially cheap these days-- so many words to wade through and sort out within all the forms of modern media. It is hard to pay attention very long--there is just so much writing and so many opinions. But, nevertheless, there is a deep, fundamental conviction within the biblical tradition that *words* are *crucial*—words are a matter of *falsehood or truth, sin or righteousness, even death or life*. And, within the biblical tradition, there is a conviction that words can be *revelatory*—telling us things about the origin, meaning, and purpose of our lives—in a way that we simply could not ascertain on our own. This great respect for the power of the words within the biblical tradition is *the beginning of the endless human work of doing theology*—whenever human beings put words together to seek to understand wisely the words from and about God, while also reflecting on our own personal experience and the experience of history.

And the biblical importance of words is why our worship of God ends up being so...*wordy*. And in the Episcopal tradition, we have so many *written* words for worshipping. Sometimes it can feel like too much. But nevertheless, here we are, immersed in words again in church, and here I am speaking. *This is the way that has been given to us*. As a kindergarten teacher might say to a child: “Use your words!” So, we as Christians are called to use the words given to us to speak of God and the words they evoke from us.

*Because we belong to a God...who wants to be known...remembered...and endlessly rediscovered—a God who invites us into a life of response.*

## 2.

And so, I want to return to John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him, should not perish, but have everlasting life.” And I want to invite you into a brief outline of a *theological response* to these words, as I am able to put together from the words of the Bible, the words of Christian theologians before us, and my own words.

- Who actually is *God*? Well, we can never assume what the word “God” means when it is used—which makes talking about God so tricky. “God” means many different things to many different people. We cannot even assume that when *Christians* use the word “God” that we are all necessarily talking about the same kind of God. How do we know when we are speaking of God truthfully and in the spirit of Christ? How do we know when, instead, we are effectively talking about a god of the ancient past or the modern present, a kind of god made over into our own image that exists to serve certain human self-interests? We believe the Bible is a trustworthy guide—but, as you’ve noticed, the Bible has never been easy.
- One way to know whether or not human words about God are speaking truthfully is when we speak of God as the One who “so loved the world”. *Love* is not just a human feeling, romance, or a bio-chemical reaction within the human body—it is essentially of *divine origin and is the purpose of all things and all people*. Divine love is the power that creates, sustains, and is the ultimate end of the universe. It is the power and purpose of God’s giving of the “Son”...of the giving of God’s very self to the world...in one very particular person Jesus...within space and time...and then that particular love being expansive to every particular person throughout space and time.
- Ahh, but this world is not so clearly beloved, is it? Even though the heavens above, and the earth below, in speech beyond words, ceaselessly declare the glory of God’s love (Psalm 19)...*there is also something terribly askew*. There is a *shadow side* to the world and human beings which inexplicably does *not* speak the words of “God so loved the world”...but speaks other words... words of disinterest, self-satisfaction, boredom, cruelty, despair, malice, and destruction. And these other shadow words keep attempting to recreate the world...that God so loves. And these other words are the words in which we may perish.
- The revelation from God that Christianity seeks to remember is intensely focused on the love of God as the beginning and end of all things—so we just cannot say “love” enough in church, as I’m sure you’ve noticed. And yet, because the love of God was so shockingly rebuffed, rationally justified, and violently executed in the cross of Christ, there is at the same time a revealing of a deeper shadow side of the world that exceeds anything known to humankind in any other religion. To crucify the Son of God, who loves with the Father, is such an *abomination*...that it is no wonder that Christians also have had such a grave sense of sin. And it is confusing for Christians to know how best to sustain a language of both such intense divine love *and* such terrible sin—without becoming obsessed with this shadow and losing sight of the ever more fundamental beginning and end of all things: “For God so loved the world”.
- The *first and last word* about God is God’s ceaseless giving to the world in love, even amid the terrible mystery of the shadows in us and in the world. It is this God “who so loved the world that he gave...” the creation of all things and peoples...and gave the Son, “God from God, light from light, true God from true God...” It is this God who ceaselessly seeks us in this life...and the life to come...and ceaselessly seeks that we, God’s beloved, turn our heart, soul, mind, and strength...toward the God who so loves.
- This is the beginning of eternal, everlasting life...and the joy of God intended for all the heavens and earth and people...even amid our perishing... “until every Principality and every Authority and Power is rendered ineffectual...and all enemies of God are stilled...and the last enemy—death—is also rendered ineffectual...and then God...may finally be all in all” (1 Corinthians 15).