

'What kind of ...', Bethesda Meditation, Lord's Day 13 December 2009.

Hymn :¹

I am sure you noticed that the two verses we have just sung both open with the same expression, 'What kind of ...'.

In the Greek New Testament there is a word which means just that² ... 'What kind of ...', 'what sort of ...', or, as it is consistently translated in the King James Version, 'what manner of'. And, as it happens, two of the seven occasions where it is found there direct our attention in the very same direction as these two verses of Bryn and Sally Haworth's hymn – namely to 'what kind of love ...?' and to 'what kind of man ...?'.

First, we owe to the apostle John the expression, 'what kind of love'. 'Behold' ('Look!', 'See!'), he began chapter three of his first epistle, '*what kind of love* the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God'.

Yes, it is true that the first verse of our hymn focused on the love of our Lord Jesus rather than on the love of the Father. But then we know that the love of God and the love of Christ are *very* closely intertwined.

For example, in the closing section of Romans 8, the apostle Paul first assured his readers that no amount of suffering or hardship shall separate the believer from the love of Christ.³ But he went on to express his conviction – his firm and well-grounded assurance – that nothing ... 'neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created being' – that nothing in the whole of God's universe ... 'shall be able to separate us from *the love of God* which is *in Christ Jesus our Lord*'.⁴

In the context there, the apostle saw (i) the love of God (the One who once spared not His own Son for us and who has justified us) and (ii) the love of the Lord Jesus (the One who once died for us, who now intercedes for us and who guarantees us surpassing victory) ... the apostle saw the love of God and the love of our Lord Jesus as interwoven in the most wonderful way.

'What kind of love the Father has given to us', John wrote, 'that we should be called children of God'. The apostle had just described the first spiritual birthmark of all those who possess eternal life: 'If you know that He (God) is righteous, you know that every one that practices righteousness has been born of Him'. It is only to be expected, John was saying, that all those who are truly born again will exhibit the family trait of being righteous.

This is the first reference to the new birth in John's epistle, and it is clear that, as he pens the very words 'born of Him', something of the splendour, the grandeur, the sheer magnificence of what this means grips his heart and soul afresh.

'Behold, he exclaims, '*what kind of love* the Father has given to us that *we* should be called *children of God*'.

Luke tells us at the end of Acts 11 that 'the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch'.⁵ But, if Luke tells us that *the world around* called the believers '*Christians*', John tells us that *God* called them '*children*'.

According to the ancient oral law of the Jews, one Rabbi, whose life and teaching overlapped that of John (Rabbi Akiva), taught, 'Beloved are Israel, for they were called children of God ... as it is said, "You are the children of the Lord your God"' – a quotation he lifted from Deuteronomy 14.⁶ And certainly Israel *were* especially loved by God and *were* spoken of as His children.

But John isn't writing to Jews. He is writing to Christians, the majority of whom were gentiles ... writing to those who Paul described (in Ephesians 2) as dead, disobedient, defiled and doomed. And yet, because of the astonishing love which the Father has lavished on them, John insists that *they* are now, in Rabbi Akiva's words, 'called children of God'.

As you know, John has much to say about the new-birth. In his gospel, he explains the *means* by which someone is born again ('As many as received Him, to them He gave the right (the authority) to become children of God, to those who believe in His name'⁷). There too John stresses the *necessity* of the new-birth ('Marvel not', he reports our Lord telling Nicodemus, 'that I said to you, "You *must* be born again"⁸). But it is here in his epistle that John traces the new-birth to its *source* – 'What kind of *love* the Father has given to us that we should be called children of God'.

And we remember that it was John who recorded our Lord's words, spoken not long before His crucifixion, 'the Father *Himself* loves you'.⁹ The bread and wine this morning tell us how much!

What kind of love is this,
That gave itself for me?
I am the guilty one,
Yet I go free.

The *second* verse of our hymn opens with the words ‘what kind of *man* ...?’ And *this* expression we also owe to the pen of an apostle – yet not now that of John, but of Matthew. For, towards the close of his eighth chapter, Matthew reports the exclamation of the disciples after they had witnessed the Lord Jesus subdue the great storm on the Sea of Galilee: ‘*What kind of man* is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?’

As some of us noted one Lord’s Day evening last year,¹⁰ each of the first three gospels lends its own emphasis to the incident. Matthew traces the storm to a ‘shaking’ – to a ‘movement to and fro’¹¹ – below the surface of the lake, causing great turbulence on the surface above.

Mark describes graphically how ‘the waves were beating *into* the boat, so that the boat was now filling’.¹² That is, Mark is saying, the waves, churned up by the strong wind, were cascading over the side of the boat – as a result of which the water level inside was rising frighteningly fast.

And, for his part, Luke says, ‘a storm (being the word for a whirlwind or hurricane¹³) ... a storm of wind *came down* on the lake’.¹⁴

But, faced with all that *came up* from *below*, with all that *came in* from *outside*, and with all that *came down* from *above* – not to speak of twelve petrified disciples – our Lord ‘arose’, we read, ‘and rebuked the winds and the sea’¹⁵ with the words, ‘Peace (‘hush’), be still (‘be muzzled’)’.¹⁶ At which, the ‘great storm’¹⁷ became a ‘great calm’.¹⁸

Long before, one of the psalmists had addressed the Lord God of hosts with the words, ‘Who is a strong Lord like you? ... You rule the raging of the sea ... when its waves rise, you still them’.¹⁹

Small wonder then, that, confronted with this demonstration of our Lord’s power over the tempestuous wind and the surging waves, the disciples were awestruck, and, filled with astonishment, questioned, ‘What kind of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?’

But, as our hymn points out, our Lord’s uniqueness extends far beyond the power and authority of His word. It brings us face to face with One who exchanged a throne – not only, as we recall especially at this time of year, for a manger, but, ultimately – for a cross.

What kind of man is this
That died in agony?

...

What kind of man is this,
Who laid aside His throne
That I may know the love of God?
What kind of man is this?

Footnotes

¹ *What kind of love is this,
That gave itself for me?
I am the guilty one,
Yet I go free.
What kind of love is this?
A love I've never known.
I didn't even know His name;
What kind of love is this?*

*What kind of man is this
That died in agony?
He who had done no wrong
Was crucified for me.
What kind of man is this,
Who laid aside His throne
That I may know the love of God?
What kind of man is this?*

² The word is *ποταπός* and does not occur anywhere in the Greek Old Testament.

³ Rom. 8. 35.

⁴ Rom. 8. 38-39.

⁵ Acts 11. 26.

⁶ The full quotation is, 'Beloved are Israel, for they were called children of God, but it was by a special love that it was made known to them that they were called children of God, as it is said, "You are the children of the Lord your God"', Ethics of the Fathers (Pirke Abot), 3. 18. (Quoted by F F Bruce on 1 John 3. 1.) The biblical reference is Deut. 14. 1. Rabbi Akiva lived from AD 50 to AD 135. See <http://www.torah.org/learning/pirkei-avos/chapter3-18a.html>. Judaism's oral law is recorded in writing in sixty-three tractates and is called the Mishnah. One of the Mishnah's tractates contains no laws at all. It is called *Pirke Abot* (usually translated as Ethics of the Fathers), in which their most famous sayings and proverbs are recorded.

⁷ John 1.12.

⁸ John 3.7.

⁹ John 16. 27.

¹⁰ Evening Praise, 20 July 2008.

¹¹ W. E. Vine's Expository Dictionary, article 'Earthquake'.

¹² Mark 4. 37 lit.

¹³ 'A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature'. William F Arndt & F Wilber Gingrich.

¹⁴ Luke 8. 23.

¹⁵ Matt. 8. 26.

¹⁶ Mark 4. 39.

¹⁷ Mark 4. 37.

¹⁸ Mark 4. 39.

¹⁹ Psa. 89. 8-9.