



Revd Ro's Reflection on The second Sunday of Christmas

Ephesians 1. 3-14.

John 1 1-18

One thing I have missed this year is taking part in public worship and presiding at Holy Communion with our congregations. Our gospel reading today is the opening to St. John's gospel and I have read that so many times at the Christmas services and I never cease to be struck with wonder as I do so. This year I have been shielding mum since March and have been unable to be with you. It has however been a huge privilege to me to be able to conduct Holy Communion at little Spital Chapel week by week. It is just mum and I but worship continues and I will be reading this wonderful gospel passage there on Sunday.

We always watch Carols from King's on Christmas Eve, the pandemic did not stop them and together with the King's Singers they produced a wonderful programme of choral music. I can remember singing so many of the carols when a member of St. Leonard's choir. The service always concludes with the reading from John 1. It is introduced with the words, 'St. John unfolds the great wonder of the Incarnation.' Indeed he does, but he does so much more. Within a few stunning paragraphs we have an overview of creation, incarnation, the nature of the Godhead and Jesus human and divine, working God's purposes out on earth.

On Christmas Day, I along with millions of others watched Her Majesty the Queen's Christmas address to her people. I am always moved by it and never more so than this year, at a time of national and international crisis. She spoke about the selfless bravery and self-giving humanitarianism of so many people and the strength that Jesus Christ is in her life. We saw pictures of representatives of these people, then of the Queen standing in front of the tomb of the 'Unknown Warrior' in Westminster Abbey. He is a representative of all who gave their lives in service to their country. As the Queen stood there I realised that she represents hope in a time of crisis. She represents the sheer indomitable courage of her country, and I felt she knew that we will not be overcome.

Her address was followed by a fascinating programme on royal Christmas speeches. One address was that given by her father George V1 at the onset of war. I will refer to this at the end.

Our epistle reading this morning is from Paul's letter to the Ephesians. We looked at Ephesians 1.15-23 on Christ the King Sunday. Today we have the verses immediately preceding this. It is worth quoting what I said then as an introduction.

'Ephesians belongs to the group called 'The Prison Letters' those written while Paul was in captivity. Paul wrote several epistles from Ephesus during his imprisonment there. This letter to the Ephesians was believed to have been written while Paul was in prison in Rome between AD 62-64. I think we can all begin to appreciate just a little of what loss of liberty means.'

The second period of lockdown has finished but tiers are in operation and many parts of the UK are still locked down. 'We know from watching our televisions as well as talking to people on the telephone that this has been very tough for some people and that mental health issues, particularly depression, has been one of the results. The losses of loved ones, of livelihood or living alone are just some of the contributory factors. There is a great deal of fearfulness and worry around, quite apart from the fact that life has changed completely and we simply can't do the things we took for granted before the pandemic.

At last people have been able to be united with loved ones for a brief period over Christmas. That has brought great joy. But still we face tough times.

All those years ago Paul faced this problem of loss of liberty to a far larger degree than we are facing and at times we can sense his depression. And yet for most of the time as he addresses those first Christians his tone is upbeat, generally during his times of imprisonment Paul rejoices in the fact that he is carrying out Christ's mission and can share in King Jesus' sufferings.

Ephesians seems to give an overview of all his teaching. Some scholars believe it is not by St. Paul but a follower at a later date. The epistle opens with these words ¹'Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus: ² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.'

Apparently in the earliest manuscripts the word Ephesus is missed out and was added later. However as Professor Tom Wright points out, Paul did write letters which were for districts, to be passed around. If we think of this a bit like a 'round robin' then there is no reason why he should have included the word. So then let's look at this early passage from Ephesians.

Ephesus in Paul's day was a thriving Greek city port; it was a centre for trade, government and power under Roman control. Its importance made it an excellent site for a fledgling church and for spreading the gospel. But there were problems, the goddess Artemis was widely venerated throughout Greece. There was a huge temple dedicated to her worship in Ephesus. In fact this caused a great deal of trouble for Paul and his followers. Paul was accused of preaching against her worship. He was imprisoned in Ephesus for some time. The Romans of course had brought their culture and deities including the cult of Emperor worship. Paul spent almost three years here from (c.53-56.) The Christian community grew rapidly despite persecution and became very strong. It is to this community and no doubt Christians in the surrounding areas that Paul is writing.

I have learned so many things as I have been discussing the readings throughout the year in my Reflections. One thing that I have noticed which honestly had not struck me before is how often the readings are very closely linked. When you read them in a service or listen to them being read there

simply isn't time to reflect or study them in the same way. This week is no exception; the opening to Ephesians and the reading from St. John's gospel are so interlinked that I will look at one as I explain my view on the other.

When I looked at Ephesians 1.15-23 on Christ the King Sunday it began with the traditional prayer for those Paul was addressing that usually opens an epistle. Here in Ephesians verses 1-14.' This opening is very different. It begins

'To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus:'² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.' I have pointed out that this was not in the original manuscripts. The passage continues with a huge overview of Paul's theological teaching. Having studied so many of the epistle readings we can recognise the themes at once.

³ 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ' The words, 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,' set the tone at once. This whole section 3-14 is a prayer; if you like it is worship of the triune God and all his wonders.

The words are familiar to us so it is easy to focus on the beauty of them and their words of worship only, so as always; we need to examine this wonderful passage in detail.

To be honest the passage beginning at v4 used to puzzled me,

⁴'just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. ⁵He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, ⁶to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.'

On the surface this looks as though God chose us from the beginning of time as the ones who would believe in Jesus and thus be saved by him. I struggled with this. Our God gives us free will; that is his fundamental gift to humanity. So how can this be right? Now I want to go to John 1 and to look at this in the light of that passage.

¹⁰ 'He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.'

This is exactly what happened. Jesus came to God's people, the Jews. He is the Messiah, the long awaited King, the Anointed One but what happened, the vast majority of them rejected him. It was all about free will, they chose to reject him. BUT ¹² 'to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.'

That is it. Jesus came to all people and we all have free will to accept or reject Jesus. It is to those who accept him that the wonderful promises of God belong.

The epistle continues:

⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight ⁹he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. ¹¹In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who

accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, ¹²so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory.

I have quoted in full because the argument is one entity and to divide it up would not help our examination of it. As always with St. Paul, one point flows on to another, building up the argument in a clear progression. So then let's look at the sentence in bold. So often in his writing, Paul has made clear God's fundamental plan, it is the new creation. That is what he has 'foreordained before the beginning of time' and it is to be accomplished through Jesus Christ, the second person of the trinity. The Messiah will reign over it as King as the prophets foretold. Those who choose to follow Jesus, who 'believe in his name' are a part of God's plan from the beginning of time and will help it to fruition.

Jesus has won this for us through the grace of God. He came to humanity at the incarnation and walked with humans. He brought the word of God and he gave his life in love for humanity.⁷ In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace ⁸that he lavished on us.' On our own we were powerless, but Jesus, God and man came to us. Our choice was to believe in him and so receive salvation through the grace of God. Thus it follows,

¹¹'In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, ¹²so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. '

To all believers God gives the gift of the Holy Spirit, as indeed he gave it to those first disciples and followers in the upper room at Pentecost. It is that same Holy Spirit who is God with us now, strengthening us, sustaining us.

¹³'In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; ¹⁴this is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.'

In a few paragraphs Paul unfolds the theology of Christ incarnate God and God's plan and promises for the whole of creation.

In John 1 we see that similar overview of the wonder of God's plans in Jesus God and man. I have looked at this passage in detail over the last few weeks but there are important points to bring out.

¹In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.'

As Paul states and here St John too, nothing God does is without Jesus the Christ. Jesus is God the second person of the trinity, here, 'The Word.' In one short sentence St. John says, he was with God, he was God. That's the opening of his gospel because that is the fact. Jesus was not only at creation; he was with God bringing all creation into being. Our God became human for us, 'The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.'

We are now, during this pandemic in a time of darkness, arguably a time of danger and disruption unparalleled since World War 2 but this enemy is an invisible one. Throughout this time we know that God is with us. This sentence sums that up.

‘What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.’

We have just celebrated the birth of Jesus at Christmas. We know that the light of Christ does shine in our darkness and the darkness will never overcome it. So many of us have set candles burning and kept them burning throughout this year as a symbol of exactly that.

Now, as we enter this New Year, we have vaccines to combat this disease. It will be overcome and life will return to normal. We will hug our loved ones again, we will worship together as we once did, and we will pass the peace of Christ by shaking hands, in fact ‘we will meet again.’

It was at another time of national and international crisis that King George VI addressed his people in the Christmas speech of 1939. I am sure he had the words, ‘The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it,’ when he chose to quote a verse of poetry from the little known Minnie Haskins.

‘I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year, “Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown; and he replied, “Go out into the darkness, and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than a light, and safer than a known way.”’

Never was there a more fitting quotation for 2021 as we go forward in the light of Christ.

God bless you all and a happy and healthy New Year to you.

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