



Revd Ro's Reflection on 2nd Sunday of Christmas 2022 Year C

Ephesians 1.3-14

John 1.[1-9]10-18

Happy New Year to you all and let us pray that this is a happier and healthier one for the world. As we enter 2022, as with any New Year, the sense of expectation and joy is mixed with trepidation, never more so than now with the pandemic still raging. We pray with confidence to God for an ending to these years of trouble. 'Jesus is the light of the world' as St. John puts it in today's gospel, 'The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.'

And we know that no darkness ever will. Jesus walks alongside us as we enter this New Year.

Our gospel reading from St. John chapter one is probably one of the most famous passages in the whole of scripture. It is read at carol services throughout the world; I have read it myself many times. Many of you will know that one of my favourite novels is 'The Dean's Watch' by Elizabeth Goodge. Towards the end of his life the Dean goes to the Christmas Eve service in the cathedral but suddenly as he stands behind the lectern he finds that he can no longer see the words before him. The gospel reading is John 1 and, because the passage is so familiar, he speaks to the people from his heart and the passage has never been more profound. He is infused with the great joy of the gospel and that overarching joy of the news of the incarnation seems to encircle the congregation and the whole of the city.

St. John's gospel is the latest of the gospels, written in about AD 90-110. It is interesting to look at the opening chapters of each of the gospels. Mathew opens with these words, 'An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.' This would be vital for Jewish readers. His is the only gospel to mention the magi. Luke begins with the revelation of John the Baptist's birth and goes on to the story of the annunciation and the nativity. Mark says nothing

of the birth but begins with the baptism of Jesus. Their style is really narrative, none of them resemble John's great introduction.

What we have here is a fully developed theology. The words are stunning.

¹ 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God.'

This is not equivocal in any way, in the first two verses John is introducing his gospel with the wonderful fact – Jesus, the word, – is part of the Godhead. Jesus was at the beginning of all things with God and:

³ 'All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.'

Jesus Christ is co-creator. Jesus is the light of the world and he enlightens all people. God's plan from the beginning of time was that Jesus would enter this world, God incarnate, fully human and divine.

⁶ 'There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.'

John the Baptist is to be the herald of the coming of the Messiah. John makes it clear that he is the harbinger of the great news; he himself is not the one, is not the Messiah. John is well aware of that and makes it clear to all who flock to be baptised by him or to hear his 'voice crying aloud in the wilderness.' John is the one foretold by Isaiah, the one who will prepare the way of the Lord. So at the end of the reading John speaks for himself.

(John testified to him and cried out, 'This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me." ') Jesus is the Christ, he is the anointed one foretold by the prophets. ¹⁶ 'from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.'

Here John calls Jesus 'God, the only Son' this is not another prophet, this is God incarnate. This is the promised Messiah who will set not only the Jews but the whole world free from sin and death.

Jesus, God and man came into the world at his incarnation. God the co-creator became a tiny vulnerable baby in his mother's arms. He was born into a dangerous world but he would grow and he had a mission designed before all time.

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.'

Jesus was sent originally to the Jews, 'I was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' But that mission, that word of God, though accepted by a few, was rejected by the majority. The long awaited Messiah was not believed; he was scorned and eventually killed at the hands of the very people who should have hailed him as King and Saviour. But to those who did believe, to those who did turn to him were given the promises of God. The Holy Spirit is poured out upon them. They are reborn in Christ.

¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,
¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.'

This echoes down the ages to us and all believers, we are born of the Holy Spirit of God, poured out upon us as it was on those first Christians in the upper room at Pentecost. When we are baptised a cross is made on our foreheads; we are sealed with the mark of Christ. The water of baptism has the Holy Spirit called down upon it. God is with us always.

¹⁴ 'And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a Father's only son, full of grace and truth.'

This is the wonderful stunning truth that we celebrate. God is not distant, he walked with humanity in the Holy Land two thousand years ago and he walks with us now. He is the light no darkness can overcome.

If there is one thing I have learned while writing these reflections is that the readings are so often linked. It is not so easy to identify that when we hear them read in church. Certainly that is true of our reading from Ephesians. There is no doubt that Jesus is at the centre of everything for Paul and John. In both, the tone is of profound worship and joy.

We must remember that Ephesians is one of a group called the prison letters. Several letters were written while Paul was imprisoned in Ephesus. This may have been written while Paul was in prison in Rome AD 62-64. Yet the profound joy that emanates from this passage gives no hint of this.

Paul was writing to a persecuted church in a pagan society. Last time I looked at this passage (Christmas 2 Year B) I gave some background to Ephesus, '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. The shout would be 'Artemis of the Ephesians' 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.'

Paul writes to them with great affection.

¹⁵ 'I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints, and for this reason ¹⁶I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.'

What we have in Ephesians is a profound overview of the Christian faith with Jesus, the Christ at the centre. 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,' It is perhaps easy to forget as we read Paul, that this was written before the gospels were and that this theology was carefully developed very early on. Paul was a contemporary of the first disciples.

The next part of the passage can be interpreted in various ways so I am quoting it in full,

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.'

Some people would say that some people were chosen by God to be saved which would mean of course that others were not. I cannot subscribe to that when the God we worship is a loving God. One of the basic things about humanity is that God gave us free will. However if we look at the introduction to John's gospel I think things become clear.

¹¹'He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,'

Jesus was sent by God into the world to save humanity. He preached the gospel of salvation and the grace of God was freely available to all. Humanity had free choice to accept or reject God's gift. Many rejected him of their own volition. But those who turned to him, who do turn to him, have the gifts of God ordained from the beginning of time:

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. 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,'

Jesus by his death at Calvary, by his life given in love for us won salvation for us and restored our relationship with the God who loves us.

This was foreordained,

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

⁶ who, though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God

as something to be exploited,

⁷ but emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,

being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

⁸ he humbled himself

and became obedient to the point of death—

even death on a cross. (Philippians 2.5-8)

Jesus Christ, human and God, has set humanity free. These people in the fledgling churches, living among a hostile society, often facing persecution, must hold fast to Jesus' example and teaching and rejoice in the promises he won for them.

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.

Worship is at the centre. If you turn to Christ, you must worship. God's praises must be the foundation of lives lived for and with him. Jesus Christ turns lives around.

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; ¹⁴ this is the pledge of our inheritance towards redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.'

These people have received the gift of God's Holy Spirit; they are marked with the seal of Christ as we are at baptism. As it says in John 1:

¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.'

We are God's Children by adoption, through Christ; we are heirs with him and will receive the full gifts of God's grace which he won for us.

Now Paul turns to God's plans for the 'fullness of time.'

'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.'

This is God's new creation, this is when he will make all things new and Christ will return to rule over the earth as its Lord and King. This is our hope, it is what we say when we pray, 'Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.'

This whole passage is a prayer; it is worship with Christ at the centre.

Heaven is not simply a distant place it is God's creation on earth, it is lives lived in and for Jesus Christ our Saviour. This is what Paul is telling the Ephesians. This is the message for us too.

Live Christ centred lives for only by doing that will God's will be done on earth. We welcome Christ God and human at Christmas time. We welcome the God who came to all humanity. Very soon it will be Epiphany; the magi were not Jews but Gentiles, they saw and worshipped the God who came in love to save all humanity. So we walk into this New Year knowing that Jesus walks with us.

'May the Lord bless you and protect you. May the Lord smile on you and be gracious to you. May the Lord give you his peace.' Numbers 6.24-26

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