

Sermon for Sunday 4 February 2024 – The Second Sunday before Lent

Revd Graham Naylor, Curate

Proverbs 8.1, 22-31; Psalm 104.26-37; Colossians 1.15-20; John 1.1-14

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Two questions for you as we come to look at scriptures this morning, and don't worry, I'm not going to get you to answer out loud. This is for you to think about, and as we look at the scriptures this morning, to maybe ponder on. So, as you come to church this morning, how do you think about Jesus? What do you think about Jesus?

Do you think of him as an itinerant preacher, a miracle worker, somebody whose name we tag onto the end of our prayers to make sure that God does as we tell him? Of course, we don't do that, do we? We don't bring our list of prayers and just say, 'in Jesus name', 'God, you better do it because I used your son's name' Or is it just me that sometimes does that? Is it somebody whose teaching you think might make you a better person? Or maybe someone's teaching who would make somebody you don't get on with a better person?

What do you think about the way you relate to God? How you're able to relate to God, how being a follower of Jesus makes a difference to life and eternity? Do you think that, as the book of Common Prayer puts it, that the work of the cross where Jesus, who there on the cross, 'by his one oblation of himself once offered made a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world', is enough?

Or maybe, like me, sometimes I think some of the extra bits that I can do for God will make him care about me more. That somehow, by being here every Sunday, I'll earn a bit more of God's favour. I'll leave those questions for you to ponder.

Paul is in prison. You may want to have your pew sheets handy to look at the reading from Colossians first, and then we'll move on to John. Paul is in prison. Now, it's possible that this was towards the end of his life in Rome, but I think more likely an earlier prison spell in Ephesus, where he probably wrote the letter to Philemon, to the Colossians, and to the network of churches that we call the letter to the Ephesians; and a man called Epaphras - anyone here called Epaphras this morning? No? Anyone know anybody called Epaphras? No? He's come to Paul. It's possible he was in prison with him. He's described later in Colossians as my fellow prisoner in Christ.

Epaphras probably came to faith through Paul and his ministry in Ephesus and then went about a hundred miles away and started a new church in Colosse. And people in Colosse had come to faith through the gospel that Paul had preached, that because of what Jesus had done on the cross and his

resurrection and ascension, that they could now become children of God. But Epaphras comes with reports that things aren't well in Colosse.

Possibly Jewish influence, Jewish philosophy, possibly Greek philosophy, had influenced them to a wrong theology. That rule keeping, the right foods, the way they washed their hands, the festivals they kept, were an important addition to what Jesus had done on the cross to make them acceptable to God. Now, Paul hadn't planted the church in Colosse, his co-worker Epaphras had done it. But Paul is bothered, so he writes to them and he redirects the Colossians to the faith that they had learnt at first. And he starts in the beginning of Colossians with an introduction, a greeting and a prayer for the people at Colosse, and before addressing the reported issues with an echo of the reading that we heard from Proverbs, with wisdom personified, where wisdom is involved in creation, he redirects them to Jesus as being the centre of everything.

And we hear this wonderful early Christian hymn. I say early because if this was in Paul's lifetime, it's between the death of Jesus, Paul being converted, Paul spending what it ten years before he started ministry, when he went off to... something like that? Ten years; he caused a bit of chaos in Jerusalem and had to escape, and then Barnabas goes and finds him after about ten years and he does his missionary journeys. So we're talking probably between 50 and 60 in the Common Era, and he's either written this hymn or he's quoting it and talking of Jesus says he is the image of the invisible God. Here, image, icon, where we get the English word icon, but it's not just a likeness, not just an impression, it's an exact and full representation of God is in Jesus. And then he goes on, in him, Jesus. In him, Jesus. In him, Jesus. Through him, Jesus. What are these 'in him's' and 'through him's' in this hymn? If you'll pardon the pun.

In him, all things in heaven and earth were created, visible and invisible, the whole spectrum, everything that we see, Jesus was involved in creating. Not only that, but he didn't leave creation just to get on with itself; he says 'in him all things hold together', that Jesus Christ is the glue that enables the whole cosmos to cohere. And in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.

We could do a whole sermon series on that, because where did the people of God believe God dwelt? Got any ideas on that one? I would love you to shout them out. Where did the people of God believe God dwelt? In the temple, in the holy of holies; and here Paul is saying, no, not anymore. He dwells in Christ Jesus, in the Son. He'll later say in Corinthians that also somehow he dwells in the temple that is us as the body of Christ, and that's a whole other subject. In him; all things in heaven and earth, the whole cosmos were created; in him, everything holds together; in him, God was pleased to dwell, to inhabit. But not only that, through him, through his obedience to death on the cross, his resurrection, his ascension, God was pleased to reconcile all things to himself, to make peace between God and mankind.

I don't often get you to do this, I haven't done it in ages. Would you just turn to the person next to you and say, 'God is pleased to be reconciled to you'. God is pleased to be reconciled to you. This picture that Paul paints here is what we call the cosmic Christ. Theologians have the fancy term for it, high Christology of Jesus. Jesus who is pre-eminent, who is of supreme rank because he existed before creation and he was agent in creation.

So Paul sets the Colossians straight. He paints this picture of Jesus who they believed in and are following, but they're saying, well, it's not just enough to do that, we've got to tag a few bits on. And he goes on too, if you read through Colossians 2 and onwards, you'll hear what his argument is. But he bases this argument in the cosmic Christ.

If you want to turn over the page in your pew sheet. And we come to the reading from John's gospel, which we maybe are familiar with because we hear it at Christmas every year. 'In the beginning was the word, the logos, and the word was with God, and the word was God.' Echoes of Genesis 1, 'In the beginning. In the beginning was the word. The word was with God and the word was God.' This is the divine Christ. And again, all things came into being through him.

Now there may be methodology there, the Big Bang, whatever the mechanism was, Jesus, the word of God, the beloved son of God, the agent of creation, all things came into being. But note that a bit further on it says that he came into the world as the true light. There is this emphasis, the true light of the world, implies that there were non true or non genuine lights and it singles out God in Jesus in the incarnation as the one true light in a society that was pluralistic, there were many gods, many lights, if you like. And here the writer of John's Gospel says, this was the true light that came into the world.

We read at the end of John's Gospel, John 20.31, that the purpose for the writer of John's gospel, writing it, was that people might become believers in Jesus, or, depending on your Greek tutor, continue to be believers in Jesus, in his name. The name is an indirect reference to saying, believe in God, believe in him as God, in the name. You remember when God was telling Moses to go and speak to Pharaoh to let the people of Israel escape from Egypt? Who shall I say sent me? 'I am'. The name was enough. But the name speaks of character, of nature.

John writes at the end of his gospel that he wrote it so that we might believe in his name. But in the middle of this prologue of John, it says that what Jesus came to do was to give power, the right, the authority for people to become children of God, to be in relationship with God by believing in his name.

Why is that revolutionary? Well, up until now, the way that you were a child of God, part of the people of God, was by your ethnic origin as a Jew. That was the way you were a child of God in keeping the law. And here, right at the beginning of John's Gospel, it's just turned on its head, saying, no, the way you become a child of God is by believing in Jesus, by embracing Jesus as God's agent, we have the ability to become what cannot be achieved by the human effort of keeping rules and laws and attending festivals.

Theologian Craig Keener puts it like this. The word, Jesus, who had been forever with God, became flesh, was born as a human being, so that we who are flesh can be born from God. He calls it the divine transfer. I'll read that again - 'The word that had been forever with God became flesh, so that we who were flesh can be born from God'; that divine transfer.

When I started speaking, I asked you a couple of questions. We then spoke a little bit about the Colossians getting their faith in Jesus mixed up with a bit of philosophy from maybe Jewish philosophy, Greek philosophy, meaning that they slightly corrupted their faith. Brothers and sisters, this morning maybe we hold up the scriptures like a mirror and we ask ourselves, is our faith where it was when we first believed in Jesus, or have we slightly corrupted it at times? Do we, do we need to come afresh to recognise Jesus as the image of the living God, the one in him, and through him, we are able to be in right relationship with God, our heavenly Father?

So as we go through this week and the next couple of weeks, as we come to Lent, a time of reflection, of thinking about God, ourselves and others, may we ponder these questions. Amen.