

Fr Tim's Sermon – Sunday 4th February 2024

The Second Sunday before Lent

Readings:

Colossians 1: 15-20

John 1: 1-14

I almost want to begin by wishing you a very happy Christmas. After all, this Gospel reading we've just heard is the Christmas Gospel. It's the reading we hear each year at Midnight Mass. It's the reading which holds in it the whole story of Jesus Christ, Son of God, Word made flesh, from the beginning until the day he was born as one of us.

But it isn't Christmas. We celebrated the feast of Candlemas a week ago, the crib is boxed up and put away, the tree is gone, and we are in ordinary time once again. So, why do we hear this reading, this Christmas reading, again today, six weeks after the last time we heard it?

If that's the question you were all asking this morning, then well done. It's a good question, and it's a good question which enables us to come alongside, grow with, and learn about, Jesus. Today we have the opportunity to learn about Jesus. Of course, that is what we're here for, that's what our faith calls us to, and that's what we do, week by week.

But today, in this little bit of time after the excitement and revelation of Christmas and Epiphany, and before the sobriety and penitence of Lent, we gain an insight into this man, born at Christmas, put to death on Good Friday, but alive in his Resurrection and present alongside us in all that we are.

St John's Gospel can tell us a lot, but before we come to that, let's have a look at our first reading from St Paul's letter to the Colossians. This is a short letter by St Paul's standards, perhaps because he was writing from prison and needed to be brief, perhaps because he wanted it to be punchy and make a point. But this is an important letter. It's written to a people who were new to the Christian faith. Paul hears in prison that they have misunderstood. Let's be honest, this wasn't unusual, and most of Paul's letters are to people who have got things wrong. But he takes the time, even from prison, to write and help them to continue to learn, to continue to grow, to continue to walk with God, and with Jesus Christ.

The passage we heard this morning is the end of the introduction to this letter. Paul doesn't really get into the meat of the letter until verse twenty-three, but in what we've just heard, he lays the groundwork for what will come next. He makes it quite clear who Jesus is, so that he can then go on to teach the Colossians so much more in the rest of his letter.

So, if we are here to learn about Jesus, then this is a good place to start. We heard from St Paul this morning that Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, that he is before all things, the head of the body, the church, the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, who has first place in everything.

And there we are. Now you know. You understand who Jesus is, and thanks to St Paul, you can go home today thoroughly educated and with a surer and truer faith. Well, if you can, then you're doing better than me.

Remember that this letter is written to a new church, to people who have not been Christians all their lives, to people who have only recently come to faith, and who have gone wrong and needed this letter to be written. They needed a little bit of love and care, of clarification and a reminder of the faith which they've come to. And this is how St Paul begins, with a jumble of complicated ideas, abstract descriptions, which don't easily fit into the human experience, and which the Colossians will have to wade through when they receive this letter.

But, perhaps this in itself is important. Yesterday afternoon, I asked Bethany to describe Jesus to me. She knows I'm going to repeat this to you this morning, but she struggled. She said that she had never seen Jesus, and that she doesn't know what he looks like. She said that nobody can come back from Heaven and tell us, so we'll have to wait and see. And perhaps most profound of all, she said that this was part of the mystery of our faith.

Well, after nine years of going to church, hearing the Bible read, living in a Vicarage, that's where Bethany has got to. And let's be honest, it's not a bad answer. But if she can't be any more sure than this, then how can we expect the Colossians, Christians for such a short space of time and coming to a new faith with no experience to draw on, to do any better?

And the truth is of course, that when we have no idea at all, there is no description that can actually help. So, when St Paul begins his letter with a description of Jesus, could he have done any better?

He could have begun by telling the Colossians that Jesus' hair was woolly in texture, that his eyes were like a flame of fire, that his feet were like burnished bronze, and his voice like the sound of many waters. These are the words of St John the Divine in the Book of Revelation, and this is the vision that he saw, but I don't think these words will have helped the Colossians very much in the infancy of their faith.

On the other hand, Paul could have been more practical. Jesus was a man of five foot eleven, with dark skin and black hair, slender and with worn feet because he spent so much time walking. That might be more realistic, but Jesus has ascended to the Father, and so we won't see him in this way, so the reality is that this is also very unhelpful.

So perhaps we come back to Bethany's wisdom, and have to accept that what Jesus looks like is a mystery which we don't have to understand. But we do have to understand his nature, and the nature of the Church and her people in relation to the Lord their God.

So, St Paul begins with this mystery. He sets out his stall with a collection of ideas and thoughts which it takes a lot to get our heads around. But he then goes on, through the rest of the letter to the Colossians, to explain, guide, and help them to know what it means to come to Jesus Christ, and to live the life he calls them to. He spends time talking about the dangers of believing in false philosophies or traditions, and he is compelling as he tells those who are reading this letter to set their hearts on things which are above.

As I said earlier, this isn't a long letter, and if you have five minutes this afternoon, you could easily read the whole thing. That would be a very good thing to do, to hear from St Paul how he goes on to instruct and encourage his people, after all, it is us who he instructs and encourages today, so this letter is written to us as much as it is to the Colossians.

If you're going to go home and read, then I'm delighted, but I don't want to give you any more spoilers before you do. So, to finish, I'd like to just come back to where we started, and return to our Gospel reading. The Christmas reading. The story of the Word made flesh.

And it's vital, alongside St Paul's letter to the Colossians, not to forget these words of St John today. They tell us something more, something deeper, something which opens up to us a whole new reality. The Word, Jesus, Was. He was from the beginning. He was from the word Go. He was with God, and was God.

This is the key to everything St Paul talks about. Jesus is God. Not God the Father. Not God the Holy Spirit. But God. God who is, who was, and who is to come. God without Jesus is not complete, and through all time, God is God. God was God. God will be God.

If we struggle to understand, if we struggle to picture Jesus the man, if we struggle to grasp the concept of God being born in a stable, or suffering on the cross, we come back today, two weeks before the beginning of Lent, to these words.

God was. God is. God will be, and Jesus, the Word, is God alongside the Father and the Spirit. Well, that's not easy either, but if we are prepared to accept the mystery, to open our hearts to the presence of God, then as we travel through Lent and walk to the cross with the Word made Flesh, Jesus Christ our Lord, then we grow closer to God with each day, and join with the Colossians in taking the next step in our journey.