

Sermon on 2nd Sunday before Lent 2018

by the Revd Canon David Hodgson at All Saints Church Wokingham 4th February 2018

Readings: Colossians 1.15-20; John 1.1-14

“He is the image of the invisible God” – “in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” – “He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being” – “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.”

The readings set by the Church for our services today are chosen deliberately to remind us of the immensity and wonder of what Christian faith claims about Jesus. In a more recent way of describing him one Anglican bishop said “Jesus is the human face of God”, another bishop said; “God is as he is in Jesus”. These claims though are not developments made centuries after the life of Jesus of Nazareth the man who appeared in Galilee in the first century. These are claims made in documents circulating less than half a lifetime after Jesus’ crucifixion. In the case of Paul’s Letter to the Colossians it is generally agreed by scholars to date from around 60AD. That’s a shorter time from the day of Jesus’ baptism in the River Jordan than the time between now and the day Lorraine and I were married in Warfield church. But I’m not really making this point as if it is irrefutable proof of who Jesus really is – it is and remains a matter of faith whether any one comes to see Jesus as the image of the invisible God and the light of the world - my point here is really to say that these immense claims for Jesus have been made by the Christian church from the beginning and this understanding of Jesus is intrinsic to the Christian faith.

So then – why are we reminded of this now; when after all, didn’t we hear those opening verses of John’s gospel only a few weeks ago in church at Christmas? We are reminded at this point in the church’s yearly cycle of who Jesus really is – of his divine glory - before Sunday by Sunday, through Lent our readings in church plunge us into the narrative of his mission among the people in Israel and the ever-darkening storm which gathers over him.

As we heard from the opening of John’s gospel Jesus came to be acclaimed as the light of all people the true light which enlightens everyone. To be Christian is to welcome the light which shines in Jesus Christ; to seek to let that light into every area of our life; our relationships; our attitudes and our actions. This is the light which brings peace and acceptance, the light which brings true self-knowledge, which can lead us into ways of peace and forgiveness.

When those opening parts of John’s Gospel tell us that the life which Jesus has brought into the world is the light - we understand that this means goodness and love and truth; and when we read “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it” we understand that it means God’s goodness love and truth were not and are not defeated by wrongdoing, hatred or lies. Later in St John’s Gospel we read Jesus saying: “I am the light of the world, whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life” and we understand this means that Jesus embodies goodness and love and truth for the world and that following him means resisting wrongdoing, hatred, or deceitfulness. Jesus brings life – Jesus is the life - which resists wrongdoing and deceitfulness and gives us the power to neutralise their pull on our lives.

The light which shines in Jesus is the light which shines in each one of us as the truth of our existence; to make the choice to live in that light rather than for ourselves is to become fully true to our life as human beings.

If Jesus had died quietly in his old age full of years and the respect of his neighbours then perhaps he would have been honoured by history as a good man, but maybe he would have been forgotten because two thousand years is a long time to honour a person however good. But it is what happened to Jesus in his death and resurrection – which we prepare now to remember through

Lent Holy Week and Easter - which means there is more to say about Jesus as the light of the world than simply to say that he gave a shining example by his life and teachings.

We are invited by Christian faith to trust Jesus Christ as the One in whom the wonder and the glory of God is transformed by utter immersion in the fragility and sorrows of human existence; who so loves this world with all its darkness and despair as to enter fully into the darkness in the vulnerability of human life. Jesus lived in a totally vulnerable way and did not escape a cruel end. He was born in poverty and executed a criminal – and yet we see in him the radiant light of God's glory. In the life and death of Jesus the mystery of God penetrates the suffering depths of human experience; the experience of finitude and meaninglessness, failure, death and rejection.

And when Jesus was seen to have been raised from death into life in the mystery of God; by that the presence of God active to transform all experiences of human life was able to be believed and proclaimed. To be Christian is to trust Jesus as the one who brings us to peace with God and ourselves; to see Jesus as the light which is not overcome by darkness and to follow him through the darkness of this world's and our own fears with confidence and trust.

Many people can see that the moral teaching of Jesus is enlightening. That Jesus was the embodiment of the light of God no-one can prove by any deductions or arguments. In faith we trust that the love which came to light in Jesus is the lifeline to the future of the world and ourselves. Each one of us proves Jesus to be the true light by our own response. Lent begins in 10 days; we are invited to use that time of Lent to re-discover in ourselves that Jesus is the true light which shines in the darkness and is not overcome.

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