

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – Second Sunday before Lent

7th February 2021

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

The Lectionary, which sets out the readings for use in churches each Sunday, is sometimes surprising. Just when the Church starts to sound bossy, saying 'Christmas ends at Candlemas' and instructing us to take down the crib last week, the Lectionary unexpectedly gives us the Prologue to John's Gospel, the reading which many think of as the Christmas Gospel. Yet here we are on the first Sunday of what the Church calls 'ordinary time'. It might seem puzzling¹, but as we shall discover, there is never a wrong time to read the Prologue to John's Gospel.

I am indebted to Christine Portman for reminding me of a book which I had on my shelves, but which I had never actually read. She mentioned it the other day in her online reflection about the wedding at Cana. It is by Stephen Verney and the book is called *Water into Wine*. It is an extended meditation on St John's Gospel, matured (like good wine) over the course of many years' reflection. It is fairly heady stuff, and you might not want to drink it every day. But once tasted, you will remember it. Although it's impossible to do justice to it in a few minutes, here is a taster.

Verney begins his book by recalling that in the Christian tradition St John is known as 'the disciple whom Jesus loved'. He writes:

'The good news which the disciple whom Jesus loved has to tell us is about that love which he himself had experienced. It was a love which was so deeply human that he declared Jesus to be the first truly human being who has ever walked the earth, the pioneer of a new order of human society. But at the same time he believed that the love which had touched his life was the energy which had created the universe and which keeps it in being'.

In Jesus, the writer of the Fourth Gospel had come to know the very source of everything that exists, and the goal towards which everything is moving. But his good news is even more than that. Jesus called this energy of love 'my Father' and he opened up a way for us to know his Father as sons and daughters, and to become what we truly are, and to experience this love in our lives together.

Before we explore this idea in more detail, how does John set about explaining Jesus's significance? Writing in the Jewish tradition, he had the difficult task of conveying to a largely Greek readership why this man's story mattered. Unlike the Jews, the Greeks had no expectation of a Messiah. So to write in terms of that promise being fulfilled – as the Gospels of Matthew and Luke do - would not have meant much to them. Instead, the author expressed the significance of Jesus's birth in terms of the Word.

The 'Word' was a concept common to both Jewish and Greek traditions. In the Old Testament, the 'word of God' was God's way of being active, calling creation into being. Later the concept of the Word became associated with the Wisdom of God that brought the divine will to people's hearts and minds. We heard a passage from the 'Wisdom tradition' in our Old Testament reading this morning.

For the Greeks, the word (the *Logos*), was the principle of order under which the universe existed. It also gave people knowledge of truth and the ability to judge between right and wrong. Greeks were used to the idea that a greater reality lay behind this one – a world of ideal forms, glimpsed occasionally. The question that intrigued them was how to gain greater access to that deeper reality.

Ingeniously, the writer of the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel found a way of speaking about Christ's birth that was equally striking in both cultures, Jewish and Greek (and so, by implication, for the whole world): 'the Word became flesh.' It was saying that the powerful, creative force which gives order to the universe and intelligence to human beings, was to be found in a person, and if we want to understand what this Word is like, we need look no further than Jesus of Nazareth. For in his life, his teaching, his dying and rising, we will discover all that we need to know about God.

The message of these opening words of the story of Jesus is that there is a pattern of Love which expresses itself in everything that comes to be. From the beginning. When Moses asks God for his name, the reply is 'I AM'. Stephen Verney writes:

'In the beginning when time began, I AM already was. ... The very being and glory of God is Love, and I AM is the to and fro of Love. I AM is the Love leaping from the Father to the Son, and from the Son to the Father. This dialogue or dance of Love is the reality which underlies everything in the universe ('all things came into being through' [this]), the movement of Love which John saw in Jesus, and which is seeking to come alive in us.'

'And the Word became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth.' In John's telling of Jesus's story, Verney notes the interplay of references to the human self (the I, the *ego*) and its encounter with the divine Love (the I AM, the

ego-eimi). In Christ, human egocentricity – which makes for a pattern of society in which people compete with, manipulate and try to control one another - is transformed into a dynamic where the ruling principle is Love, where the pattern of society is one of compassion – people giving what they really are and accepting what others are, recognising their differences and sharing their vulnerability.

Verney puts it like this: ‘In Jesus the timeless truth entered time, and I AM clothed itself in a human ego. The two orders became a dialogue of Love, and as John and the disciples looked at the Son of Man letting go his human ego and receiving it back transformed, they saw the grace and the truth of I AM. ... Grace means the free gift of himself which the Father is giving, ... the gift of his Spirit springing out of human flesh. They saw that Jesus lifted up on the cross was giving them that free gift, and that all who see and believe now have authority to let go and forgive and love one another.’

Verney’s writing seems to me to capture the essence of what all three of our readings this morning are seeking to express in their different ways. That we find in Jesus the fullest expression both of our humanity and of the divine energy which lies at the heart of things, and that to discover this is nothing less than life-giving. As John writes at the end of his Gospel: ‘these [signs] are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.’ (John 20.31)

The thing about the Incarnation is that it is endless, although revealed in a single life. The risen Christ who first appeared to the disciples on Easter Day is present with us now and through eternity. There is no end to Love, even though our circumstances change. There is no end to possibility, even when we feel locked down. God's purposes are endlessly renewing, endlessly creative, endlessly

forgiving, endlessly recreating. There is no right time, and no wrong time, to read the Prologue to John's Gospel. There is no right time, and no wrong time, for the Spirit of Christ to be born in us. Let it be now. For where God is active, there is no such thing as 'ordinary' time.

Amen.

ⁱ There is actually a simple explanation. About forty years ago, when the Alternative Service Book was introduced, the Church of England decided to liven up 'ordinary time' by introducing themes for different Sundays. The Second Sunday before Lent was designated Creation Sunday, with readings on the theme of creation. But with the introduction of Common Worship twenty years ago that idea evaporated, so Creation Sunday isn't mentioned any more. The readings are still there, though without their explanatory label.