

Second Sunday before Lent – 7th February 2021

It was a glorious day yesterday in Bath, cold but sunny, and the night before, Orion was stretched out across a clear sky with just a crescent of waning moon. It has been beautiful, and in the depths of a February lockdown we need beauty, light, flowers, music and fragrance to remind us of God. Last week we lit candles for Candlemas and this week we hear of Christ as the light in the darkness that the darkness does not overcome. As I was preparing this sermon I lit candles and waited in the sunlight for what it was I should say to you today, and I remembered two deeply, deeply spiritual people. One explained that you know the presence of God as you recognise a fragrance. I understood her to mean not that God was like a beautiful scent, but that a fragrance evokes something of the delight and beauty of God.

And the other friend explained how – at best – she experiences God as light. She talked of ‘sunbathing’ in the presence of God. Not that God is like the sun but that the warmth and joy and sense of wellbeing that come from sunbathing evoke the joy and delight of God’s presence. For some, music seems to bring them into the presence of God – but that is not to say God is like music but that music evokes an aspect of God.

In the same way, when John uses the term ‘Word’ for Christ, he knows that while Word is a metaphor for an aspect of God, it does not encompass all that God is. For John, the word of God by which he lives is the Old Testament, in which the word “shares God’s identity in such a way that God’s unity isn’t compromised.”¹ For example in God’s revelation to Isaiah, God breathes out his word and Isaiah hears:

“As the rain and snow come down from heaven
and return not again but water the earth...
So is my word which goes forth from my mouth.
It will not return to me fruitless
but will succeed in the task I gave it.”²

In the Old Testament the word is the Spirit of God communicating, moving over the earth and inexorably doing God’s work.

In today’s Old Testament reading, the personification of God’s Word is Wisdom who has been present with God from before the beginning of the earth. Wisdom is a Master craftsman, or in some translations a child, the co-creator with God and the one in whom God delights. The author of Proverbs, perhaps Solomon, was groping his way toward reconciling the remoteness of God in eternity – “before the first bits of soil were made’ – with God’s immense tenderness for us as God’s delights in the human race.³

When Jesus is finally revealed:

- in the incarnation as we celebrated at Christmas,
- at his Baptism as we celebrated at epiphany,⁴
- and in his own teaching: ‘He who has seen me has seen the Father,’
it all becomes clear.

¹Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament’s Christology of Divine Identity*, 2008, pp1-59

² Isaiah 55.10-11

³ Proverbs 8.31

⁴ Matthew 3:17 ‘This is my beloved son in whom I delight’ AMPC

What was attributed to Wisdom or 'the word of God' is in fact an attribute of Christ, the incarnate God. As Paul recognised in his letter to the Colossians, Christ "is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation."

Now, in Christ who both created the world and chose to live and die in his creation, there is no barrier of metaphor. We no longer have to rely on a beautiful day, or music, or the goodness of those around us for insight into the nature of God. Christ is not just a metaphor of God, but in him "all the goodness of God was pleased to dwell"⁵ and in him God was pleased to reconcile all things whether on earth or in heaven.

As we look towards Lent from a time of pandemic and lockdown, it is encouraging to hear that message of universal salvation. To **all** who receive him, who believe in his name, he gave power to become children of God. There is no entrance requirement. No demand that we recite the creed or read complex books or join a particular church.

In the brief days before Ash Wednesday, let's take time to delight in the tenderness and love of God who delights in us, who creates clear bright days and star filled nights for us to play in, and gives to all who receive him power to become children of God. There is no need to give up chocolate or wine, or to despair at the effects of the pandemic, but there is need to pay attention that we may be one of those who see the light in the darkness and receive him and are given power to become children of God.

⁵ Colossians 1.19