

2nd Sunday before Lent – Bishop Richard Harries Sermon

St Mary's, Barnes, Feb 4th 2018

Today's Gospel, the prologue of St John's Gospel, is one of the most tremendous pieces of writing in the Bible, as much poetry as prose as it takes us deep into unfathomable mysteries. Familiar to us from its regular use at carol services and at Midnight Mass on Christmas Day, it is good to have a chance to have a more leisurely look at it outside that particular liturgical context. The key image is the Greek word, Logos, translated Word. This was a fundamental concept of much Greek philosophy. It referred to the rational principle in the universe as reflected in the ordering of nature and the reasoning of the human mind. But the image also draws on the Hebrew idea of the word. The creative word of God which brought the universe into being "Let there be" and the prophetic word which spoke moral truth through the prophets of Israel. In the beginning says John was the word-the word was with God-the word was God. Everything that was made was made through him. And it leads up, as we know to the astounding statement "And the word was made flesh, and dwelt among us,".

St Augustine of Hippo, who died in the year 430, the most important figure in Christian history outside the New Testament, taught secular philosophy in Rome for many years. Later he wrote that before he became a Christian he had come across everything in that prologue except the startling claim "And the word was made flesh". This is the astounding unbelievable, believable message the church proclaims

The passage in today's epistle is no less astonishing. "He is the image of the invisible God, his is the primacy over all creation. .. in him

God in all his fullness chose to dwell and through him to reconcile all things to himself.

How is it that within decades of the death of Jesus on the cross these two major thinkers, could make such all embracing claims, taking him out of the thought forms of Judaism by which he was formed and in which himself taught, to give him this universal significance?

The answer of course is the resurrection. They were convinced that the one they had known as Jesus had been raised into a totally new kind of life, the very life of God, and that this life united them with God for ever. It was this that made them re-think everything they had thought before. They came to see everything in the Hebrew scriptures as leading up to this point. And as the prologue of John makes clear they came to see the insights of Greek philosophy as well as the revelation to the Jewish people as finding their fulfilment and focus in him.

The point I would want to make is that they did not begin with some abstract notion of God and draw conclusions from that but from what they had experienced. The very heart of God made accessible to them in Jesus and binding them to him for ever. It was this that cast dramatic new light on everything- the past, the present and the future.

I would like to suggest a similar starting point for ourselves. Not the actual resurrection of Christ of course, but our own spiritual experience. Here I must be careful. By the word experience I do not imply anything dramatic-visions, or voices or even anything highly emotional. I mean your and my day by day attempt to live prayerfully before God and with God, knowing something of his grace as well as our failings. You may not think your faith is up to very much but however groping or fumbling with its doubts and questions, a candle burns within. This inner life, however weak or faltering you may think it is, is the fundamental datum in which your life and my life is to be interpreted and lived out. Faith said a wise man, is life lived on the evidence of its highest moments.

The writers of the New Testament looked at the prevailing world views of their time, at Greek philosophy and Hebrew religion, in the light of this faith and interpreted them accordingly. We live in a world where, though Greek philosophy and Hebrew religion are still highly relevant, is dominated by the thought of evolution. We know that some 13.8 billions years ago a big bang occurred and the universe has been expanding outwards at the speed of light ever since. We know that since the formation of the earth about 4.6 billion years ago there

has been a gradual process of evolution with homo sapiens only appearing in the last few seconds when measured on an evolutionary time frame. When Brian Cox or some TV luminary is taking us into the mysteries of space and the mind reels again because of the unimaginable extent of it, we might well wonder where God is in all this. If we consider just visible stars alone, there are, apparently, a million with 20 noughts after it, of them. As we watch David Attenborough unfolding the mysteries of the planet and the long history of evolution again we may wonder where God is in all this random mutation and genetic selection. But God is not an object in the world of objects, a thing in the world of things, which it is the scientists job to explore, but the ground of all things. Where then do we discover this ground, of all things?

Where we know God is in ourselves- but this has huge implications for everything else we know. One aspect of faith that is fundamental to a believer is the conviction of being a creature, of being moment by moment dependent on the ground of all being, of being held in existence by the fount and origin of all things. This is a fundamental datum with vast implications. As Austin Farrer wrote. 'Because we have God under the root of our being, we cannot help but acknowledge him as the root of all the world's being'. If moment by moment he holds us in being, he was doing the same at the moment the universe came into being and at every development within it.

Similarly, If we know God drawing us into his purpose in our own life, then that same purpose was drawing the whole evolutionary purpose. So, Farrer again 'To make you or me God must make half a universe. A man's body and a man's mind form a focus in which a world is concentrated and drawn to a point. It may be in that point that I know existence but it is an existence that involves the world.'

If we know God in ourselves we know him to be in the stars and at the expanding edge of the universe. If we discern his leading in our own lives, then he is there also as the lure of evolution, for without evolution we would not be here.

So, I return to our own Christian life, the inestimable gift of faith, however flickering. This is a lamp, a light that not only guides our own footsteps but illuminates the whole creative process up to us and which will guide not just us but that whole creative process into the unimaginable future of time and beyond time. The little light in us can also be something of a searchlight, a faith to see the world as it comes from God and goes to God. There is darkness all round of course, but there is enough light to go by. Let us let that light illuminate all we think and say and do. The more we trust that light for ourselves the more we can trust it for the universe as a whole.