Sermon

Epiphany II Yr A

19/1/20

Eltham

**Readings**

Isaiah 49:1-7

Psalm 40:1-14

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

John 1:29-42

+FSHS

The ceremony of Nine Lessons and Carols is held by some cathedrals and large churches during Advent, or occasionally during Christmas season. I sang at St Peter’s Eastern Hill on the Sunday after Christmas in just such a service. While services of lessons and carols were held in the late 19th C it didn’t rise to popularity until during the first World War, held at King’s College Cambridge in 1918 as a memorial to the departed and prayer for peace and an end of war. The service is literally nine lessons from scripture, each followed by a prayer and a carol; each lesson is chosen to tell the story of salvation: Adam and Eve with the apple in Eden, God’s promises to Abraham of land and a people, the prophecies of Isaiah, the Annunciation, the birth of Jesus and adoration of the shepherds, the coming of the wise folk from the East. And the ninth lesson is always the Prologue of John’s Gospel, John 1: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God, and the world was made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. The Word was made flesh and dwelled among us”. It is sometimes introduced or entitled: “St John unfolds the mystery of the incarnation”.

It’s a good way of describing the clever construction of the gospel of John, and of its method: the gradual revealing of ideas, as if bits of a picture were coming at different times into focus until we see the whole thing. Today’s gospel reading is a case in point, and continues to unfold the mystery of the incarnation.

We should have started the reading from verse 19, just after the prologue ends, because John’s narrative begins with John (who here is not the Baptist, but the Witness) on the first day giving an account of himself, and pointing the way to Jesus. On the second day, which is when our portion today starts, John sees Jesus coming towards him and then tells his disciples the story of what happened when Jesus was baptized (the Holy Spirit as a dove descending). Interesting that here John tells the story, rather than it being an experience of Jesus himself (as in Mark) or of those who stood around (Luke and Matthew). On the third day, John sees Jesus again and points to him and says, “There’s the Lamb of God”, which prompts his disciples to go off and trail Jesus, and then encounter him. It’s a shame that the reading ends here, because on the fourth day, the day after Andrew and Simon Peter have stayed with Jesus, Jesus calls Philip to follow him, and Philip goes and collects Nathanael, who also has a profound experience of Jesus. It’s then three days later when Jesus shows up at the wedding of Cana in chapter 2. Altogether that’s seven days, and that’s significant because it’s a parallel to the seven days of creation. Here, the incarnation of the Word means new creation, something entirely new. John the Witness is the pivot point between the Prologue, and the revelation of Jesus as who he is.

Interestingly, there’s a whole string of different titles assigned to Jesus – as if in this first chapter people around Jesus are trying to work out how to call him/what to call him, to describe his role and function, or to say something about who he is. John the Witness sets off the trend: “Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” That unknownness morphs the next day into: “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”, who will baptize with the Holy Spirit, the Son of God to whom John testifies. On the third day (and remember third days are important – resurrection, enlightenment, knowledge) he says “Lamb of God”, his disciples switch allegiance and trail Jesus to find out where he’s going, and when he notices they’re following him and calls them on it, they call him “Rabbi”, Teacher. Andrew (one of the disciples has a name, now), goes to find Peter, and says: “We’ve found the Messiah, the Anointed one.” Another name is given: when Simon encounters Jesus, Jesus names him Cephas, Peter, the rock. (Lots of name calling here.) And on the fourth day, Nathanael comes closer to the truth: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God”. And this prompts Jesus’ response, his own way of defining himself, with the promise of the vision of an open heaven and, “You’ll see angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man”.

It’s like through the structure of the story, as Jesus’ identity is revealed, hearers/readers are being invited to unfold the next page, take the next step to understanding what “And the Word was made flesh and dwelled among us” means. John is modeling in the way the story is told, in the rapid string of events, the pattern embodied also in Jesus’ words to the disciples: “come and see”.

Now, that’s an odd exchange. Jesus realizes two fellows are following him. Does he turn and say, “’S’up, guys?” or “Did you want something?” No. He asks them, “What are you looking for?” What are you searching for? And in asking that, we know he’s not asking them whether they’re lost and need directions to the nearest city gate. He’s asking a life question: what are you searching for? But the disciples’ response gives the impression they’re having a conversation at cross purposes. Or perhaps they are not ready to face that deep and penetrating question, because they ask Jesus where he’s staying (the day is far past and night is at hand), perhaps with the hope they could stay in the same place. The word used for “staying” is the same one Jesus uses in the Last Discourse when he says “Abide in me”. So what the disciples are asking is something about whether and how Jesus will abide, and they’re requesting to abide with him – which has a longer projection than just one night. And Jesus’ response: “Come and see”. He doesn’t give directions, but invites them to come with him, or to follow him (which amounts to the same thing). Nor does he overwhelm them all at once with a revelation beyond their comprehension, but invites them to take the next step in knowing him and understanding his purpose.

Like those disciples, we’re invited to take the next step, to come and see. The journey of getting to know Jesus and understand his purpose is not something we can ever say is “done” until after this life is over. We are always learning new things. And more than that, the truth is that because we tend to get stuck in thinking of and relating to God, staying in places that are safe, we need to hear this invitation again and again. We need to hear it again and again so we can move on from those seemingly comfortable places, and take another step towards God’s glory and grace, towards living God’s glory and grace, to encountering Jesus, and experiencing his presence in us and with us. Because our destiny is, by the Holy Spirit, to be shaped and conformed to the likeness of Christ, so that his face shines from our faces, until just as he shares our humanity, so we come to share his divinity. Come and see. Take the next step towards that shining reality, towards the beauty of the Lamb of God.

We so need to do this, to continue coming and seeing, because our world still so desperately needs the light that shines in the darkness, and there are many who need to be invited (who are waiting to be invited) to come and see. To take a step closer and find themselves in Jesus’ presence, hearing him ask, “What are you searching for?”. John pointed the way to Jesus for his disciples. So our lives are to witness to the transformative power of what it means to encounter and experience Jesus, for others.

MAT. Mission Focus Group. Pathways programme will help us with this. But at the heart of it, is about our hearts and lives being open to encountering the Risen Incarnate One. May we ourselves, each of us, have that mystery of Jesus unfolded to us, personally, and together.

The Lord be with you.

**And also with you.**

Soren Kierkegaard famously has said: “The door to happiness opens outward.”