

In the Beginning - God

A Sermon for Creation Sunday - 2 before Lent.

I have just come back from what in the Army I would have called a Recce of the Holy Land. I went so that I was prepared, if asked, to help and support Bishop Martin on the Diocesan Pilgrimage in May. I expect that visit, and the next one, will colour much of my preaching from here on in. It was an amazing and life-changing experience in many ways, and I am not going to give you a blow by blow account of the itinerary, so relax. Maybe once I have a few days to edit the film I might be able to put together a short presentation.

For now, I want to draw on that journey as we deal with today's readings. Two Sundays ago, in Christchurch, Nazareth, I worshipped with the local Palestinian Anglican Christian community. We sang hymns that could be fitted with both English and Arabic words simultaneously. Arabic - yes, I was surprised till I thought about it. Nazareth is on the West Bank, and all the people there speak Arabic, not Hebrew. We said the Lord's Prayer together, and we were given a precis of the sermon, in English.

The preacher, an Anglican priest recently arrived from the Lebanon, said what a great privilege it was to walk in the steps of the master, both in the Holy Land, and also in all of our lives. And this was a powerful message for us on our pilgrimage.

For you see, our faith is incarnational. We do not follow a God out there that we know little about. Our God became man, and pitched his tent here with us, as one translation of the gospel puts it. Jesus was a real man. The stories in the gospels ring true when you see where he lived, you visit the places where he taught, and you go to pray at the foot of the cross. We do not follow some vision conjured up as a cunning fake - Jesus was a real man, who like me, nearly turned his ankles on the rocks on the Lake shore; a man who bathed in the Lake, who was baptised in the river. He was a man who had family and friends.

But what was he - just a man? Christians believe that he was so much more. John's great prologue is so wonderful and cosmic and it makes the mystery quite clear - Jesus was the Word of God. But what does that really mean?

Well, there has been much writing and lots of technical discussion on this idea. I hope I can simplify it without damaging it: The Word of God is the Wisdom of God, and the Wisdom of God is seen in the Old Testament to be a person - a discrete entity. In Genesis we see the idea of creating happening because God spoke - and the Word of God then had a continuing existence throughout creation.

Our first reading emphasises that Wisdom and God delighted each other. And then the letter to the Colossians shows us that Jesus, the anointed one, in other words the Christ in

Paul's language, is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him.

Jesus existed with God before time as God's living word. He became a human being and showed us the qualities of God - not what God looked like, nor that God could be limited as humans are - but that God was love, that he cared for the creation that he spoke, and that he yearns for us to love him, simply love him in return.

There is a song in *My Fair Lady* where Eliza Doolittle falls in love with her mentor Henry Higgins, but is infuriated to find that he is all talk. Out of her exasperation she sings that famous song:

don't talk of love - show me. Show me now! How well God understands his children. He knows that we need more than words, and so he sends Jesus to do just that - to show us God's love. Colossians again - through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

I was so fortunate in Jerusalem. Like Mary I went early in the morning, while it was yet dark, to the place revered by Christians for centuries as the tomb of Christ. While I was there a mass was to be celebrated I was used into the cave along with three other people - while my friends stood outside where they could still hear. And as I took the bread all I could say in my heart was "You did all this for me!"

Yes, we have a real incarnational faith - rooted in a real place, at a moment in the world's recorded history. We worship a real God who has given us a wonderful gift of total self-giving love. And it was his plan that this should happen from the beginning.

So what? What happens next. Are we simply to unwrap our Christmas present and say "Thank you?" Not at all. What God wants is our unrestricted love. We have already heard it: love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.'

And we cannot do that in isolation. Just as Jesus walked along in the company of real men and women who had their own trouble, their own joys, so to must we. And the way that you and I can love God is to love the people with whom we share our daily lives. Family? Yes of course - although that doesn't always happen. Friends? Yes, Enemies? Yes them too.

How? By praying for them. By befriending them, and meeting their needs when we can. By being there for them. While I was away there was a lot of love being spread around Rothbury as people were cold and without heating. That's what I mean. But this love is not just to be turned on in an emergency, as when you find a wounded foreigner on the road,

but at all times.

Hard? Yes it is sometimes. There will be times when you want to stay in. There will be times when you want to spend the money on something else. Jesus didn't promise that it would be easy - but that it would be rewarding. Rewarding not just in heaven, but now. Love has its own rewards.

At the tomb where they laid him all I could say was: "You did all this for me - all I can give you is my life".