

Synod sermon 2017

[Readings Isaiah 6.1-8; Ps 29; Colossians 1.15-29; John 12.20-28]

Let us pray: Father, glorify your name. Amen

In March 1966, a smart, self-sufficient, ambitious 15 year old atheist found herself sitting in the little Baptist church just down the road at an evangelistic rally. At the end of the service, she sat pinned in her seat. No idea what had happened to her cheerful self-reliance, except that she'd run into something huge, the only self-sufficient One: King of kings and Lords of lords, the creator of the universe, high and lifted up, holy and awesome.

And like Isaiah she was undone.

She was also called that night.

Twenty-one years later, that call found new expression in the Anglican church, as I was ordained deacon around the feast of St Thomas in 1987, and five years later, as priest in 1992. I like it that I was ordained on Thomas' day — I dare say we have all, like Thomas, had our share of doubts and griefs — but more than anything else nowadays it's not his doubt and grief, but his response when he does see Jesus that connects me to him. There's no indication in the story that he does what he says he wants to do, no indication that he touches Jesus, just that cry from a transformed heart: 'My Lord and my God!'

Has it ever struck you how very odd that is? It's clear from the resurrection stories that they encountered a man, flesh and blood. Much the same man that they'd walked with and joked with and learned from for three years; but Thomas doesn't greet him with 'Maaate!! You had us right scared! Great to have you back!' No. 'My Lord and my God'.

Thomas was a Jew. Worshipping a man as God was not in the script.

And that brings us to Colossians: listen to this!

'15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; 16 for 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. 17 He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and 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.'

And not only that, but 'Christ in us, the hope of glory'!

The only response I can find in myself to this is awe. Wonder that God himself should bend to come among us, wonder that we have been invited into intimate relationship with the King of kings and Lord of lords, the one who holds all of creation together. I note that worship and awe isn't very much in our cultural script. The last thing we want to do is live flat on our faces before God! I was preaching a few months ago at an induction in another place and afterwards one of the priests wrote me an impassioned complaint because I'd preached on surrender, on being yielded to God. She was horrified that I could suggest such a thing. I do get that. It took me a very long time to unlearn my fear of surrender. Surrender is utterly counter-cultural, and I'd say most particularly for women who've struggled for a voice, to be seen, to be treated with respect, let alone treated equally.

But that is what God is after in us; in all that happens to us, he's seeking deeper trust and dependence. Jesus doesn't get to be our Saviour unless he's also our Lord.

And I'm eternally grateful that I met him as Lord well before I understood my need for a Saviour. I even declined on that night over 50 years ago to say 'the sinner's prayer'! I note, by the way, that God didn't seem to mind that I didn't get it: I'd woken the next morning with a joy I'd never experienced before, utterly transforming joy, and had gone back the next night, got out of my seat and gone up the front to make a public declaration of faith.

Now you will not be surprised to know that I've been reflecting on this 50+ years of discipleship, 30 years as a deacon, 25 as a priest. It's often routine under such circumstances to ask 'where have the years gone?' But I know where they've gone. There's been abundant blessing; by the grace of God fruitfulness even when I wasn't 'on the ball'. There are also regrets, both personal and on behalf of my generation. I am more and more aware that we — my generation — have been asleep at the wheel. I regret the state my generation has left the world in: greed, for example, (which according to Col 3 is 'idolatry') leaving the planet struggling to breathe; and our carelessness with relationships, our blind self-focus and pursuit of wealth and pleasure. We've lost our way (Tom Wright in his excellent small book on modern paganism and the

church tells the story of the absent-minded professor who sends his wife a telegram: 'Am in Coventry. Where am I meant to be?'¹)

We need, I believe, to find our Way in Jesus once more, to see him as he is, and recommit to radical discipleship. The Church under our watch has been almost oblivious to huge cultural changes — we have accommodated ourselves to that change, and too often have missed how profoundly counter-cultural the gospel is. Note that there's warning in Colossians 1 too: warning about suffering for the sake of the gospel, and warning about the threat of loss if we do not persevere, and in chapter 3 the very clear statement of how we are to live as a consequence of God's grace and mercy. The way of the world we live in is very much the way of 'sexual immorality, of greed, anger, malice, and of abusive language'. How deeply attractive is the new baptismal clothing of compassion and kindness, humility and patience, peace and love.

The divide between the proclamation of the gospel and our culture has become for me sharply focused in recent months in the debate over marriage.

Now, first let me say that the one thing I am glad about is that at least and at last we are talking about marriage. But I have been deeply dismayed at how both sides, Christians arguing for 'yes' and Christians arguing for 'no', have often blindly followed the prevailing culture.

On the 'yes' side the thoughtless agreement that marriage is only about 'love' (so when one falls in or out of love, we just move on, yes?) rather than commitment and sacrifice for the sake of the other. And on the 'no' side, the careless talk from Christians that they are defending 'traditional marriage' as if it is the same as the Christian vision of marriage. Why would we defend something that has been often unsafe for women and for children (and therefore, I would suggest, for men)?

So what is the counter-cultural response? It is time I would say for us to look hard at ourselves and our relationships, to offer the world something undeniably beautiful, the New Testament vision of marriage, where wives and husbands treat each other 'in the same way' (1 Peter 3) as Jesus does in his self-sacrificing self-giving for the sake of the world. Marriages that demonstrate what true community looks like, and undergird fully inclusive communities of

¹ Tom Wright, *Spiritual and Religious: The gospel in an age of paganism*, SPCK 2017

faith, love and stability and mutual service overflowing to the benefit of all, including those of us who are celibate. 'Christ in us, the hope of glory' indeed!

We live in a fundamentally pagan society, a society where the worship of false gods is rife (the thesis of Tom Wright's book I referenced earlier). Like the early Christians we are also needing to throw off both the certainties and complacencies of being 'religious' (along with our idols), as well as the pagan lifestyle we are so accustomed to, and align our hearts with the radical transforming challenge of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Our culture with its progressive certainties and aggressive dismissal of dissent presents us with new challenges. We're not used to rejection and dismissal. But let's get used to it: God continues to be at work calling us to account, cleaning us up, confronting us with our syncretism and accommodations.

He also calls us to look again at what he has put in our hands.

I love that moment in John's gospel when Jesus says to his companions that though they are indeed servants, he's now calling them friends. He invites us into partnership with him in bringing the coming Kingdom. He invites us to a new awareness of the wonder of our rescue from the power of darkness and welcome into the Kingdom (Col 1.13-14). He invites us, reconciled with God, 'holy and blameless and irreproachable before him', to join him as he works to reconcile others. With Paul, we are commissioned 'to make the word of God fully known'.

We live in a world where modern-day Greeks come and say to us 'Sir, we would see Jesus'. Beloved, it is 'he whom we proclaim'.

Let us this night, renew once more our allegiance to this gospel, to this Lord, both for our own sakes and for the sake of the world.