

## Back to basics

A sermon prepared by Revd Canon Andrew Wright for St Peter's Wolvercote, Second Sunday before Lent online service 7 February 2021

*Refs: Proverbs 8. 1, 22-31; Colossians 1. 15-20; John 1.1-14*

The story is told, one particularly pertinent in these days when so much of what we do is via computer, of God discussing the state of the world with one of his angels. Looking down he sees self-inflicted damage everywhere. Failures in sharing bring poverty, hunger and disease. War, injustice and cruelty are rampant, forests burn, plastics pollute the oceans, ice caps melt. God is distraught. "What can I do?" he asks the angel. The angel thinks for a minute and then offers a tentative solution: "have you tried turning it off and turning it on again?"

Today's trio of readings are amongst the most soaring visionary passages in the Bible. Together they bring us back to basics. As we approach Lent, we have an opportunity to press our own reset buttons. Perhaps that will be of special importance this year as we emerge from these bitter months into something of a changed world. What lessons have we learnt, as individuals and as a community? How easily faith can become a weekly treadmill, without too much thought or reflection? How easy, as sometimes happens to our computers, for it to become messy and jumbled, leaving us feeling helpless and without the skills to straighten it out? How challenging it can be to find ways of living out our faith effectively in the maelstrom of our lives? Most of us find ourselves out of our depth at times in IT matters, crying out for help. Sometimes my mother, who struggles with computing but goes on writing her books and poetry, calls up to me in desperation. "Andrew, I have lost it all, everything's gone." Sometimes that too can be metaphorical of how faith can sometimes seem in dark moments. Yes, our spiritual lives can be messy. A looming Lent in these latter days of pandemic seems a good time for a turn off and turn on again.

I have a great friend who is enormous fun to be with, full of laughter, opinions and stories. As it happens, he is also a committed atheist, indeed an evangelistic atheist rather in the spirit of Richard Dawkins. In dismissing faith as childish fantasy, as a reflection of arrested development, there is perhaps a tendency to pigeon-hole beliefs which in reality are so diverse, complex and nuanced. Faith often inhabits a world of poetry rather than prose. Nevertheless, his passion for a scientific approach, appeals for evidence and provocative questions form a healthy check on easy answers and comfortable piety. He serves as a constant reminder to me of the need for authenticity and integrity in believing. As individuals how do we keep our faith real, live it out effectively and make sense of it to others?

The church faces a hard road ahead. While virtual services and church leadership in social action through COVID have clearly brought impact and opportunity, it is becoming clear that church in its traditional forms will not emerge from the pandemic unscathed. Those Covid challenges coincide with an increasingly secular society, the ongoing loosening of natural links between church and community and perhaps theological questions raised by suffering and by a fragmented and fearful world. We are going to have to go back to basics as we ask what it means to be, at the risk of sounding a bit cheesy, authentically Christian. As a church community together how do we keep our faith real, live it out effectively and make sense of it to others?

So, where to start? As Christians our faith begins not with metaphysical concepts but with something very physical - with the life and death of a historical person, Jesus of Nazareth. In that is our fundamental rootedness. At one level or another all can relate to that and it is the first port of call when we are accused of mere fantasy or wishful thinking. That is where today's epistle and gospel readings take us. The man Jesus is the touchstone of our faith. To press our reset button is to go back to that extraordinary moment in time. We do so with open minds and hearts, prepared to wrestle with those gospel stories which form the heart of our worship. What might that moment in time teach us about how to live in our own moments in time? How can that moment in time teach us about how to view eternity?

Let us first touch briefly on Proverbs. Proverbs is amongst a group of Old Testament books known as Wisdom literature. I love Proverbs – it includes feet on the ground practical advice, rooted in hard experience of daily life. 'Better is a dinner of herbs with love in than a fatted ox and hatred with it, .... A hot-tempered man stirs up strife but he who is slow to anger quiets contention.' It is a book rooted in time but one that also touches on eternity. Here, in chapter 8 Wisdom is pictured as a person, a woman in fact. At the start of this chapter, she is imagined standing at the city gates, crying out. She is there to be heard,

accessible. The writer suggests Wisdom has been there since the very beginning, actively involved since creation. Now she remains in our midst. Beautifully, she is said to “rejoice” in God’s inhabited world and “delight” in human beings. These words, as one commentator puts it, almost suggest a sort of merry giggling. God’s wisdom is there to be found, dancing amongst us, showing men and women how to live happily and well in what can seem a chaotic world – a path for living in harmonious partnership with a loving God. The ideas in Proverbs 8 find continuity and fulfilment in both our Epistle and Gospel.

The authors of John’s Gospel and the letter to the Colossians are working their faith out in a similarly chaotic world, in circumstances as challenging as ours. The context for John may well have been a Jewish community in which Jewish Christians were facing disruption and exclusion. Paul’s world was one of high stress, endless rejection, not infrequent threats, real beatings and imprisonment. They too are trying to work out an authentic and truthful faith in such circumstances. Jesus is at the beginning and heart of that.

John starts then with the historical figure of Jesus. That is the root of his gospel, the man who walked, talked, lived and died. Over many years he and his community have reflected on that man, on his story and on all that has been experienced since. The whole New Testament immerses us in that exciting process of early church thinking. They had no doubt of the pivotal and transformative importance of this man who had so recently lived and died. A man in time whose life had such eternal significance. The early disciples had attested to an ongoing experience of him, to what they called his resurrection and then his Holy Spirit. But who was he, for them, for the world? Ultimately the answers they came to, the sincerity with which they held them and the quality of their lives and service were so powerful that they transformed an empire and a world. John 1 is one of their most powerful statements. In this transformational man lies the key to understanding life and death, meaning and purpose. In a direct allusion to Wisdom of Proverbs 8, John proclaims Jesus as the Word (the logos) who became flesh and who lived among us, full of grace and truth, who shows us the glory of the Father” . Here is the greatest incarnation of God’s Wisdom crying out to us at the gates. A man in time has brought eternity amongst us.

And so also in Colossians. In this great hymn that kicks off Paul’s letter, he begins with Jesus, the man of history. But like John, after many years of reflection and discussion, his journey has taken to him to a place where he can suggest “Jesus is the image of God, the invisible one, the first born of all creation. In him all things hold together”. We can imagine the little congregation, meeting at Philemon’s house in Colossae, perhaps just 10 or 20 of them in a bustling city. We can imagine them being drawn into this inspiring vision of a world changed and transformed by this ordinary man. Time and eternity.

We could spend months, years, digging away at these amazing passages. Today, I am simply reminded of the need to get back to basics. To the life and teaching of Jesus and to those abundant reflections of what might be the meaning of his life and death, that we read in the Bible and far beyond. We are all in different places on that journey and we will not always agree. Indeed, there might not always be right answers. But that is where authentic faith, loving living and making sense of it all begin. New strategy emerging from the Church of England is focusing around two phrases: “Jesus shaped lives” and “Jesus shaped Church”. Such phrases can mean many different things to many different people and should be treated with caution. I am not generally keen on soundbite theology. Surely, however, in taking us back to basics they are worth reflecting on as churches and as individuals. Albert Schweitzer, that amazing man of the late 19th and early 20th century, theologian, organist, missionary doctor, engaged famously in what became known as the “search for the historical Jesus”. He wanted to discover Jesus in a new way as he sought to set the track of his own spiritual life. I leave you with that great quote from him. Jesus, he says, “comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same words: "Follow thou me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time.”

Where will our journey with Jesus take us this Lent as we contemplate through him both time and eternity? **Amen**