

Revelation and Hope

A sermon preached by Lay Minister Dr Tony Lemon at St Peter's Wolvercote 16 June (Trinity Sunday) 2019

Refs: Proverbs 8.1-4, 22-31; Romans 5.1-5; John 16.12-15

'When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth'. John 16.13

'and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us'. Romans 5.5

[Wisdom] 'rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race'. Proverbs 8, 31

It's common to hear clergy say they find it difficult to preach on Trinity Sunday. Perhaps this explains why Charles has given the task to a layman this year, happily unencumbered with that depth of theological knowledge which makes the Trinity so challenging! In looking at our three readings today it seems to me that they point us to the themes of revelation and hope: the revelation of all truth, and the Christian hope that rests on a living God, indwelling in his people on earth.

Once a month I go to a small group in Woodstock that purports to look at the Bible, in practice mainly the Old Testament, as literature. We usually stray far from this objective but it's invariably an interesting and lively discussion. When we read Proverbs we all agreed on the poetic beauty of this remarkable book, which seems to represent a collection of folk wisdom, generated in an oral culture and dating from different periods, passed down over generations. The 'revelation' in Proverbs begins with instruction and preparation: the early chapters present themselves as a handbook of the experience of others designed to offer insight and guidance, especially to the young. In this morning's reading, wisdom is portrayed in female form, aligned with God at creation. As the reading ends she is beautifully portrayed as 'rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race' – glorious words that celebrate all that is positive about God's human creation, reminding us in the midst of all the world's woes of the fundamental wonder of our creation, of all the things of which we are capable and all the good things that human beings have achieved in the midst of strife: in the words of the general thanksgiving, 'our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life'.

'Revelation' suggests a gradual process. What teaching can be given depends on the students' capacity to receive and grasp it. Jesus has many things for the disciples, but 'you cannot bear them now'. Jesus holds back the farewell discourses which we find at the end of St. John's Gospel as late as possible, so that the disciples are in a position to understand. He tells the disciples that he is leaving them for their own good – just as any teacher's job is to prepare his students for the time of separation: the time when the student can find the resources to stand alone – in the examinations that many are currently facing, in interviews, and ultimately in the world outside school or university. Parents similarly seek to help their children grow up capable of being independent and self-reliant, capable of standing on their own feet – never an easy task, and one that requires fine judgement and forbearance. Jesus takes this process as far as he can with the disciples during his earthly ministry, to prepare them sufficiently to start on what will be a mental pilgrimage or exploration in which, when Jesus is gone, they will be led by the Holy Spirit into a fuller understanding of the truth which Jesus embodied.

Before the disciples can understand they must first experience events which have not yet happened – the passion, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Then there is the stage of illumination, where the meanings of these events are revealed; and then the experience of fellowship in the Spirit which leads them to a consciousness of their union with one another in the Lord. Each clause of our Gospel reading ends with the promise that things will be declared to the disciples – they are not to clamour for all the answers to divine mysteries now, but to be patient: true revelation cannot be hurried.

This concept of revelation as a gradual and continuing process, one which only *begins* for the disciples towards the *end* of Jesus' earthly ministry, is of tremendous significance for Christians through the ages, and for us today. It means, unambiguously, that there is no end to God's revelation. That revelation is by no means confined to the Bible – to confine it in this way would be tantamount to saying that since about A.D. 120, when the latest book in the New Testament was written, God has ceased to speak. God's Spirit is always active, always revealing truth: through the Spirit Jesus lives and in him God's revelation goes on in the lives of those who seek to follow him. He speaks to us all through our own lives and experience, and he speaks through the collective lives and experiences which have contributed to the tradition of the church.

Just as the truth which is revealed is not confined to the Bible, so it goes far beyond what might be termed theological truth. Great artistic achievements in poetry, literature, art and music may all be seen as part of God's revelation: Handel, when he wrote the Hallelujah chorus, spoke in the language of his time (and clearly before political correctness had even been thought of!) when he said 'I saw the heavens opened, and the Great White God sitting on the throne' – a way of expressing his sense of inspiration. In the same way we can see great medical, scientific and technological discoveries as revelation. Ultimately all such brilliant human achievements are discoveries only in the sense that David Livingstone discovered the Victoria Falls: they seek and discover what is there – parts of God's truth. All truth, viewed in this way, is God's truth: all is part of the ultimate reality: science and the arts, along with theology, are different routes to the revelation of truth. That truth, all truth, is, like the Victoria Falls, something waiting to be discovered by those with the courage, the vision and the intellect to search.

Revelation, then, is the continual opening out of the meaning of God's truth, a truth introduced to men and women by the life and teaching of Jesus. Christians, from theological scholars to the simplest worshippers who come together in churches or house-meetings, are all part of the effort to seek truth for themselves – to find meaning in the lives they lead, the families and communities to which they belong; to find meaning in the tragedies and the oppression as well as in the happiness and celebration; meaning in the evil and the good; meaning in wasted lives and the suffering, the fulfilment, the achievements and the joys that make up the fabric of life. To come closer to truth in God's revelation we must, in the words of our lesson from Romans, allow God's love to be 'poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit': this is what gives substance to our hope.

By the Holy Spirit we mean the presence of Christ amongst and within us – this sounds fundamental, but what does it really mean? Does it matter, or is it simply a question of doctrine which can safely be left to theologians? In one sense, it probably can. The doctrine of the Holy Spirit as part of the Trinity – God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit – goes far beyond anything the New Testament defines. The Congregationalist theologian Nathaniel Micklem once said that the number three is quite secondary: early theologians, he said, might just as well have settled on four – the ground of our being, the divine wisdom, the incarnate word and the Holy Spirit – and their understanding of God would have been no different. The Trinity, and the *doctrine* of the Spirit, is not a divinely revealed formula, but an attempt to rationalise the beliefs, experience and speculations of Christians over the centuries.

Ultimately there can be no separation between God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Trinity is but a human formula that helps us to conceptualise our beliefs. There is an identity of Christ and the Spirit within the hearts of Christians. It was this for which Jesus prepared his first disciples, this which transformed their hearts and minds, giving them untold courage and strength, after he left them. Jesus assured his disciples that he would be with them to the end of time. This was and always will be the source of the Christian hope – the source of what strength and inner resources we manage to find in our lives, and the beacon of God's continuing revelation.