



Ephesians 1.15-23
Matthew 25.31-end
22nd November 2020

The Inner Eye of Hope

INTRODUCING THE THEME

At the moment, like many people, we miss our jaunts into London.

A place we loved going to was The Other Palace Theatre in Victoria. Andrew Lloyd Webber's Really Useful Theatre Co. own it and it's a small auditorium of just over 300 seats and therefore has a very intimate feel about it.

We sat on the front row for the last play we saw there called *Fish*, a play starring Kelsie Grammar, who played Frasier in an American TV sit com that we used to love watching.

Kelsie Grammar is one of those actors who simply fills the stage with his charismatic presence. As soon as he came on the atmosphere became charged and heightened. Even more so when, at one point, he actually came down to the front row and sat in a spare seat, treading on Rachel's toes in the process – she was thrilled!

Perhaps we all know such people, friends and family, who can enter a room and simply fill it with their presence, sometimes without one word even being spoken.

I loved reading one of the historic obituaries of the Revd Dick Sheppard, one-time vicar of St Martin in the Fields. When he died, one newspaper wrote, Trafalgar Square felt a colder place because of his absence. This minister, who often struggled with his own demons, had brought a sense of light, hope and warmth to central London through his ministry at St Martins. Something of the presence of God had been felt through the conduit of this Man of God who, even though his parish contained the palace at the end of The Mall, made the defining feature of his ministry the care of the homeless at the end of his street.

We Christians use all sorts of words to describe both God's mission and ours. Is it about proclamation, incarnation or service? Well, probably it's all of these. Yet the very last line of the reading we've just had from Ephesians describes the mission and activity of God amongst us using different sorts of word. Paul talks of the 'fullness of God filling the universe in all its parts'.

I think that's a great image and the Jewish Scriptures has a similar sentiment in Habakkuk when it talks of the *earth being filled with the Glory of God, as the waters cover the sea*.

It's a picture of the light and love of God simply overflowing and filling our life, our church and our world, so that no part of our existence escapes his hope-filled presence.

This week we say goodbye to the New Testament book of Matthew for a while. It's been our constant companion through the Sundays of 2020 but next week, on Advent Sunday, we pass from the Year of Matthew into the year of Mark.

In a moment we'll hear from Matthew's gospel those words that describe our mission as giving a cup of water or a piece of bread to a friend in need, visiting someone who is sick or keeping in touch with a person in trouble. Christ says, in this Matthew passage, that whenever we've offered such service to another human being, it's as if we have offered it to Christ himself.

It fits with the idea that Mother Theresa had, that underpinned her concept of mission, that whenever she looked into the eyes of the sick on the streets, it was as if she was looking into the eyes of Jesus. So, as she cared for them, she served him.

What does mission mean? What's our mission here at AFC? Doesn't it have something to do with seeking to enable the transformative presence of God's love and light to FILL us and then everything around us.

THE INNER EYE OF HOPE

Gracious God, we thank you for your word in scripture and made flesh in the Lord Jesus Christ. Help us now to catch your voice and speak, we pray, to our hearts and minds. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Over recent months there's been so much disappointment that we haven't been able to sing in church.

It's been great to have the Chancel Singers who have breathed a certain vitality back into our services, yet we long to join in and with one, united voice praise God.

As the hymn goes: *Born in song, God's people have always been singing...*

Well, not recently, but it will come back, and we look forward to 2021 perhaps as the Year of The Song!!

Today's Ephesian reading, in its original language, is basically just one, very long sentence. It is as if Paul starts and simply doesn't know how to stop, so words just keep tumbling out. And it's like a song, a song of praise. Indeed, someone has even given it the rather snappy title of *Doxology in Theology!*

In this song of praise Paul worships God for the love he has received from the Ephesian Christians and he says he never ceases to give thanks for them.

We are often told that singing is good for us and I love that one of the U3A groups that meet at AFC, set up for people who enjoy singing but are either not used to doing so in a choir or reading musical notation is entitled: *Singing for the Terrified!*

The last verses of Ephesians 1 are a song from the heart. A song that starts off in thanksgiving for Christian fellowship and ends up in praise of the God who offers that Fellowship a sense of resurrection hope.

In verse 18 Paul's song turns into prayer as he longs for the Ephesians to be a people whose *inward eyes are enlightened so that they may know God's hope.*

A bible commentator has rather helpfully summed it up in a two liner:
*Hope occupies the God spot and
God occupies the hope spot*

It's as if the words God and Hope become interchangeable for us.

Over half term we had tea with an old friend whose son works in the theatre. These are tough times for that industry, so he's used these months to write a play about the Pilgrim Fathers. It's been in rehearsal throughout the autumn and when Lockdown is over its booked to begin its run starting, appropriately enough, in Plymouth.

In this anniversary year we've been remembering these Puritan Christians who set sail to the New World with so much hope in their hearts. In truth they hardly knew what they would find when they made landfall, yet they travelled *hopefully.*

Their journey becomes a metaphor for all our journeys.

Although Paul is confident of the hope of heaven, like all of us he doesn't know what we'll encounter En route. But that's the point of this type of hope. It gets us through, no matter what comes our way.

Life is more like a mystery tour than a planned excursion. There are moments of struggle and times of disillusionment, yet we press on trusting in God and finding our better selves in the process.

Living with the inner eye of hope means cultivating a positive and optimistic attitude of travel rather than continually asking from the back seat if *we are nearly there yet!*

So, on what basis should we be hope-filled people?

Paul defines such hope as being rooted in the resurrection of Jesus and here's what he says in today's passage: *God's mighty strength was seen when he raised Christ from the dead...*

The story of Easter is one of two reactions to the life and message of Jesus that are in complete contradiction.

The death of Jesus came about because those who crucified him could not accept the love, justice and forgiveness he showed.

The resurrection of Jesus came about as God affirms the love, justice and forgiveness Jesus showed.

Paul says it is that Life of hope which is at the very centre of the universe.

He wants to say to these Ephesians that the story, meaning and reality of the resurrection could become their story too. The hope and strength that is at the centre of the resurrection can also be at the centre of our lives too. There is this continuum from the life of Jesus through to the life of the Church.

It's the reason we meet on Sundays. Every Sunday is a celebration of Easter Sunday and the day of Jesus' resurrection.

I also think it's the reason why the Celtic cross, one that combines both a cross and circle, the means of death and the sun of resurrection, seems the most complete symbol of Christianity.

The hope we have En route as we travel as disciples is not simply an optimism in the goodness of human nature but in the deep and profound significance of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In every sense we are, and should always be conscious of being, an *Easter Morning People*.

Now today is celebrated in the World Church as Christ the King Sunday so perhaps Paul's song, from Ephesians 1, that speaks of God enthroning Jesus *at his right hand, far above all government and authority and any title of sovereignty* is an appropriate one for us to hear on a day such as this.

We are not the first, I think, to sometimes despair at the way Absolute Power corrupts absolutely. In that first century world the manifestation of such an abuse of power came about in religious persecution and intolerance, as it has done frequently since in our political and democratic evolution.

Back in 1925 Pope Pius XI, rather like Paul, wanted to point the Church and the World to a different sort of hope than that found in the rising intolerance of totalitarian fascism in Spain and Italy. He wanted to celebrate a different kind of authority – that of Christ the King.

From 1925 to 69 this Sunday was held on the last Sunday of October and then transferred to the last Sunday of the Church Year, the one before Advent.

Today we are celebrating a Servant King. One who wore a crown of thorns and whose throne was a cross. This Servant King washes feet and spends time with children, accepts those on the margins and gives us who fall over a second chance. This Servant King invites us to join him in building a community based on the life and message expressed in Jesus Christ.

That is our strength for the journey. It's worth singing about! A song, that the earth may be filled with the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

May it be so as we continue our pilgrimage always looking forward with the inner eye of hope – hope in the resurrection and hope expressed in a life of loving service.

Amen

Ian Green, Amersham