Sermon for 2nd of Christmas Year C

Readings Ephesians 1:3-14; John 1:1-18

When the Berlin wall came down in 1989 I was living in Germany as a padre in the British Royal Air Force. Perhaps the secret services, our political leaders and some media commentators knew what was coming, but at the time it felt like a huge, wonderful and unbelievable surprise!

At the time we were still engaging in war games – with Blue forces (us) having to defend ourselves against a sudden attack from Orange forces (them – which we never named for diplomatic reasons, but we all knew were the Russians and Warsaw pact forces). Within a few weeks I was driving across the old border where the fence had been pulled down for the width of the road and taking my family on holiday to the old East Germany. A whole new world seemed to have sprung upon us rendering all our old assumptions obsolete. **Subsequent events between Russia and the Ukraine and western nations may question how permanent that new world was, but it was very dramatic and very real at the time.**

Well, did you realise when pulling your Christmas crackers, or tucking in to your Christmas ham, that we were celebrating a similar, and even greater revolution that came with the birth of Christ?

Our two readings today draw on lofty Greek and Hebrew concepts to try to express the almost inexpressible. The whole of the Jewish world had come to an end as it had been known for over a thousand years and a whole new world had come into being. It was as if a new creation was already breaking into history. John deliberately tries to echo the Genesis creation story: “In the beginning was the Word,” whilst Paul speaks of God’s plan from before the beginning of the world that had now come to fruition in Christ.

John speaks of the Word which was before the world was created and everything that was God was equally the Word. The Word is God’s self-expression, God’s self-revelation. John later says that “God is love” (1 John 4:8) and love can only exist where there is relationship.

In the mystery of the Godhead, prefiguring Trinitarian formulas of later years, love expresses itself; this same love is expressed in creation so that the whole of creation is infused with this divine Word, the very DNA of the universe is relationship with God, for through him all things were made (John 1:3).

Humankind has also this same spiritual DNA; we are created for fellowship with one another, but supremely with God. We are capable of self-expression, of expressing will, capable of relationship, only brought to birth through the relationship of a man and a woman. Yet sin has allowed the darkness back in to obscure the light that God has placed within us (John 1:4, 10-11). Darkness has hidden our relationship to God.

The darkness has not overcome the light, but it does fail to comprehend the light. So too the darkness that sin allows into our souls struggles to comprehend the light of God, for we prefer to live in darkness, unable to comprehend the benefits that living in the light would bestow.

John then detonates his bomb: moving on from his speculative theology, or his metaphysics, he says that God has now acted in recent history through what was announced by the Baptist and brought to light in Jesus.

Paul praises God for the grace that has been received through the sacrificial death of Christ, God’s secret plan fulfilled in Christ.

This is the new creation which has been brought to birth at Christmas and completed by the death and resurrection of Christ. This new world is entered by faith in Christ, by accepting the light of the Gospel.

Those who do not believe, those who persist in living in darkness, may eat the Christmas ham at our table, may shop in the same stores, read the same books, watch the same TV programmes, but they inhabit a parallel universe, they are living in a different world to us who believe.

The philosopher Karl Jaspers explained that the “world” (Welt) is a human construct of the mind. “World” is the interpretation we bring to the raw facts (Dasein) of physical existence. From that outer world we construct a world in our minds to make sense of our existence.

The difference between living in an inner-thought -world which has been redeemed by Christ and one that has not, or in which there may not even be God at all, is as different as light and darkness.

ii

Those who are prepared to believe, and by that John means intellectually, emotionally and enduringly living with that understanding of the world, engaging in that relationship with God, relying on the merits of Christ and risking life and liberty in this world rather than lose hold of the blessings of the world to come – those who so believe have been given a New Birth. The broken relationship sewn in to our spiritual DNA has been restored. We are now living life as we were intended to live it – as children of God.

Both Paul and John say that this restored relationship is not dependent on blood ties, on the will of a human father to have children, but is an act of God towards those who believe. In other words, John and Paul are saying that they no longer believe that you can be a child of God just because you are born a Jew. This was a revolutionary way to speak about their Jewish heritage.

The Virgin Birth of Jesus inaugurates this restored relationship and sets the paradigm for all believers to follow. Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary. He was not born as a result of the will of a human father, but at the will of a divine Father and the compliant will of Mary who believed the message of the angel.

So too, all Christians who believe have a Virgin Birth; their new life is not conferred by human genealogy, by nationhood or by cultural inheritance. They are born again by the gift of the Holy Spirit; anyone who is “in Christ”, says Paul, is a “new creation, the old has passed away, the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5.17).

Or, as in Ephesians 1, Paul says that upon receiving the Good News, God “put his stamp of ownership” upon the believers, and “they **became** God’s people.”

iii

What are these believers asked to believe about Jesus in order to become the children of God?

Quite simply, they are called to see, in Paul’s words, that God is the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:3), or in John’s striking words, they are to see in Christ the glory that befits God’s only Son (John 1:14).

The glory of Jesus the Son far exceeds that of the patriarchs and prophets.

We soon hear from John that Jesus said to the people: “Before Abraham was born, I Am” (John 8:58). Moses gave Manna to eat and water from the rock, but Jesus says, “I am the living bread that came down from heaven…Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life…For my flesh is the real food and my blood is the real drink”(John 6:54ff).

So, concludes John, “God gave the Law through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17).

Therefore, John says, belief in Christ means that: “The only Son, who is the same as God and is at the Father’s side, he has made God known” (John 1:18).

The question is: Is that what you see in Jesus Christ? Is that the Christ you see in baby Jesus when he makes the occasional appearance on today’s Christmas cards?

If you do not, you may have sung your carols and given your brightly wrapped gifts, but you are not living in the same universe as those who do believe.

Have you known your New Birth? Have you been born, not of the will of a human father, but of the will of God?

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard**

**February 2015**