Sermon for last before Advent Year C

Readings: Colossians 1:15-20; Luke 23:33-43

i

The Colossians were struggling a bit with their new faith when Paul wrote his letter to them. They were feeling a bit embarrassed that the God they proclaimed had been nailed to a cross and mocked. That didn’t sound too impressive a thing for a God to endure. They accepted the theory of why Christ had died on the cross for their salvation, but they didn’t think a suffering, dying Jesus was the best advert for their faith. So they decided to give God a make-over.

The wished to elevate God back to the celestial glories that God should enjoy. How else would their faith appeal to the world where even the emperor-god in Rome possessed such power and pomp? So they put God back to a safe and respectable distance – and claimed that God could only be approached through the mediation of angels and these angels had to be appeased and persuaded to offer their services by Christians following certain rites and observances, based on the Jewish Torah (2:16).

Paul’s response is to assert that they need not fear their new faith is unmarketable because it is growing quickly across the Roman world (Colossians 1:6), in other words, the Colossians do not need to panic and start doctoring their faith to make it fit the world’s agenda.

Paul then quotes what seems to be a Christian hymn in use at the time which proclaims that Jesus “is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation, through whom all things were made in heaven and on earth…whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities. He is before all things…the first born from among the dead, so that in everything he might have supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him and through him to reconcile …all things...through his blood, shed on the cross.”

That is awesomely powerful stuff to say about God, it is even more extraordinary to say such things about a man who has recently walked down the street, eaten meals with his friends, been arrested by his enemies and put to death as a blasphemer. Yet Colossians was written about AD61 and Paul seems to be quoting a hymn already in use – so it just shows you how immediately within the living memory of those who knew Jesus, the things the Church later formulated into historic Creeds were already being said about Jesus by those who had known him and the circumstances at the time.

The Colossians are being urged not to feel ashamed of a crucified God, what Paul sometimes refers to as the “scandal of the cross” (Galatians 5:11), because the scandal is that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. We have no need to be ashamed of that and there is no need to try to make that scandal more acceptable to suit the predilections of the Greco-Roam world in order to fabricate what the Colossians felt they needed to compete with other religions of the day.

Whilst emphases and language legitimately move with the centuries, we must not fall prey to the temptation to amend the gospel to fit in with the prejudices of a particular period of history: as Paul says to the Corinthians – “we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God” just because some people find the gospel hard to believe (2 Corinthians 4:2).

What Christians say about Jesus and what God has done through him stand for all time, until Christianity ceases to be. And even if not a single human being believed Jesus had been raised from the dead for the salvation of the world, it would still be true, if it was ever true in Paul’s day or in ours. Post-modern relativism that reduces truth to being nothing but a temporary, subjective, take-it-or-leave-it “true for you” concept will not wash with an historic faith like Christianity.

Either we take the NT as a reliable source that gives us a fair account of what people saw and heard and experienced in the company of Jesus Christ, or we reject it as an act of mass and enduring self-delusion. However unpalatable modern sceptics may find the things said about Jesus in the NT, we can be pretty sure that this is what they honestly believed about him. Whether they were right or deluded to believe such things is for each of us to decide for ourselves.

Either Jesus Christ was raised on the third day and is now seated at the right hand of the Father, or he wasn’t and he isn’t. Jesus isn’t the Son of God just because I and a few mates think he is. Either he is or I am mistaken. The crucified and risen Jesus poses that fundamental question to everyone who hears the gospel proclaimed.

ii

This existential choice is the focus of Luke’s account of the crucifixion. The two thieves crucified either side of Jesus make their own choices. Luke includes this detail of the penitent thief because through it, he is addressing his patron Theophilus, for whom he is writing his gospel account (Luke 1:1). Just as the thieves had to choose what they thought about Jesus, so too must Theophilus, and by extension, so must each one of us.

One of the thieves does not really believe in Jesus, but since all other options have now gone, he chances his arm and goads Jesus to prove he’s the Messiah and save all their skins. Well, it was worth a go, you have to admit. But this is not faith; it is cynical expediency. Go through the motions as back-up insurance, you never know what might come of it.

The other thief, however, is less concerned about himself and more concerned about Jesus being convicted unjustly. The penitent thief is prepared to admit his own guilt, but by saying Jesus is innocent, he is saying that he believes what people are saying about him and that he is the Messiah. He must think this if he thinks it possible for Jesus to admit him into his kingdom. He asks Jesus for mercy, but who alone from God dispenses mercy to man about to die?

Faith, however late in the day, will receive its just reward.

iii

Down in the catacombs of Rome we see evidence that despite Paul’s claim Christianity was spreading quickly across the world, there were some who struggled to accept it. There is some anti-Christian graffiti in the catacombs which depicts Jesus on the cross with the head of a donkey.

Proclaiming Jesus the Son of God was blasphemy to some, especially Jews; to Roman officialdom it was treachery; to Greek philosophical schools it was nonsense; and to graffiti artists in Rome it was a joke. Who is Jesus to you?

Be careful how you choose, for much hangs on that decision.

It is also worth taking a look at some of the alternatives men and women have chosen over the years for their God. For we all seem to have a throne in our hearts whether we like it or not, and sooner or later we place someone on that throne, even if it is only ourselves.

In the days of Paul and the apostles Nero was of the options. If you refused to address him as a god you were thrown into the nearest sewer – not a very pleasant way to go.

Nero murdered his first wife, kicked another to death after an argument and reputedly murdered his step-brother and his own mother. He used Christians who wouldn’t call him God as human torches to light his garden in the evening.

I don’t suppose there was much genuine faith in Nero as God – most of it would have been the fake, expedient variety that quickly melted away as soon as he was off the scene. But there have been a string of other alternative gods on offer from that day to this.

Not all the alternatives have been as unappealing and ridiculous as Nero’s claim – but there have been a few of unimaginable cruelty we could all name, some still in power as I write these words, who claim the throne in people’s hearts where truly only God has the right to be.

A crucified God may be a bit of an enigma, at first sight, a contradiction in terms, but as an expression of an invisible God who reaches out to the very depths of human need and depravity to redeem those whom he has made – Jesus is not such a bad candidate. He has my vote, anyhow.

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