

The Last Sermon

Last Sunday morning Alison preached a cracking sermon, didn't she? I thought it was one of the best I've heard her preach. So, she's set the bar pretty high, and I'm afraid I can't emulate that, I don't think this will be one of the best sermons I've ever preached (I'm feeling a bit too emotional for that). But with God's help it will be 'good enough'. And it *will* be the Last Sermon I preach from this pulpit – at least, as vicar of this parish.

Richard Baxter, the 17th century Puritan hero who was vicar of Kidderminster for many years during and after the Civil Wars, wrote, "I preached, as never sure to preach again, and as a dying man to dying men." So, last sermon is good. Any sermon a preacher ever preaches could be their last, whether through personal accident or mishap, an asteroid hitting the earth next week, the Second Coming, whatever. So a preacher should always perhaps have in mind, If this is the last time I can speak to these people I love and have a responsibility for, the last time I can give them some word of encouragement, instruction, admonishment, exhortation, so that they go on growing deeper into the love of God and into all that God wants for them, what should I say?

Not all biblical texts lend themselves equally well to this, but today's passage from St Paul's Letter to the Colossians is good enough. And yes, it is one of my favourite passages from St Paul. So, thank you, Lectionary.

It really starts in mid-sentence, because Koine Greek was entirely innocent of full stops. St Paul is speaking about the Son (the One by whom God has rescued us from the power of darkness and brought us over into the Son's Kingdom) who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. It would be great if you would read this chapter yourselves, during the next few days. But for now, just stop and think about how extraordinary this whole passage is. This letter was probably written, to the young church in Colossae, in the early 50s of the 1st century AD, maybe 53 or 54. So it was not much more than 20 years after the death of Jesus. People would still be alive, who remembered and could talk about Jesus, what he was really like, and the impression he made on those who heard him. Paul himself – we don't actually know that he had seen or heard Jesus while he was alive, but quite possibly he had – had been utterly convinced after the crucifixion that Jesus was not, could not be, the Messiah. He tried to quash the idea that he was, by killing these Jesus people or throwing them in prison. And twenty years on, here he is calling him not only Messiah, Christ, but Son of God. He is making a claim that Jesus of Nazareth, and this divine being, are one and the same. That this Being was pre-existent with God from eternity, was a party to the creation of the universe, is in fact the cohesive principle of everything that exists, the meaning and explanation of everything, the source and goal of all things.

This is A Big Claim. It was for the people of the 1st century, whether Jews or pagan Greeks; you may think it's even bigger for us who know so much more about the scientific origins and nature of the universe, whether that's Big Bangs or black holes or Higgs boson particles or all those other things I know nothing more than the names of. (How many of us understand more than the littlest thing about them?) How many of us fully understand what St Paul is talking about? He is not talking science. He is talking Mystery, a mystery we could not work out unless it was revealed to us, but which claims to make sense of everything. We may not grasp it, yet it can so move us that, if we give ourselves to it, our lives will never be the same. And the Mystery is that at the heart of our life and of all things, is love. The great Unknown

which we hope or guess at, has a name, and the name is Love. It's like Dante says, after his journey through Inferno, and Purgatory, and Paradise, and he finally beholds the Reality, and it is

l'Amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle – the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.

Here is the truth: I am loved, and you are loved, by the One who sustains the universe in being. And we are not meaningless blips in infinity, because that One knows us and our names are written on his hands and in his heart.

I stand here today because, some 46 years ago, Christ captivated me. And has not let me go, or let me down, in the years since then. Actually, of course, he was reaching out to me and trying to get my attention all the years before that as well, in fact as the psalmist says For it was you who formed my inward parts; | you knit me together in my mother's womb. | I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. (Ps.139.13f) It just took me 21 years to catch on. And I think I'm still catching on, because of all those times when life presents us with counter-evidences. When things go wrong, or bad things happen, all the times you really can't understand what God is doing, the times when even vicars have doubts. You know some of the things that make me most angry, and most doubting. It's when people hate, and preach hatred, and even kill other people, and claim they are doing all that in the name of God. What kind of religion does that? What kind of God permits a religion to turn into that perverted thing, and (apparently) isn't doing anything about it? There are other things, as well, that make even a vicar doubt. But it's precisely in those times, that it is most important for us to know that the Love that moves the sun and the other stars is holding us. Like the shepherd holding the one lamb that wandered off and got lost, like the mother holding her newborn baby.

And this is what I want to leave you with, as my Last Sermon legacy. I want you to know, with even more assurance than you do already, that this is why we are here. Here on this earth, here in this church: to celebrate this Mystery, to know this Mystery more fully, to live the way it teaches us to live and to seek by all means to make this Mystery known to those who don't yet know it.

Another of my great Christian heroes through the years, my patron saint almost, has been St Benedict. St Benedict of Nursia (480-547), one of the great figures of Western monasticism, author of the Rule of St Benedict which was (is!) foundational for so many of the religious orders that have sustained the Church. RSB has all the qualities which I treasure in the Anglican way, the Church of England's way: the daily round of prayer and praise to God; a spirit of moderation and pastoral gentleness; a profoundly healthy work-life balance (as we would call it now) of prayer, work, study and relaxation; the determination that all should be included, no one in the Christian community should be left behind, or lose heart and give up, or feel that they and their gifts and abilities don't matter; the core values of stability (staying in the place where God has called you), obedience to the Word of God, and conversion of life (even though all of us are only ever beginners, Benedict encourages us to be constantly seeking to grow). The Christian community, whether that is the monastery or the parish, is meant to be 'a school for the Lord's service'. (Prol.45) And it is Christ-centred, through and through. St Benedict says, the love of Christ must come before all else (4.21), and [of those who follow his Rule] Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ. (72.11)

That's what I have wanted, and want, for this community of our two churches here in Marston and Elsfield. And will continue to pray for, as I pray for you in the years to come.

So. Let the love of Christ come before all else, and prefer nothing whatever to Christ. Because it is Christ who is in you, who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, the firstborn from the dead, the One in whom all things hold together. And all this is so, because the Love that moves the sun and the other stars loves you with infinite, unconquerable love.

Alison and I can leave you, sadly but confidently, because you are in good hands. And I don't mean Rob's, and the wardens' (though, indeed, they are not such bad hands, either.) No, you are in good hands, because you are in God's hands, you are in those hands which flung stars into space, but were also to cruel nails surrendered, hands from which nothing can ever pluck you, or cause you to fall.

Let us pray.

Preached at St Nicholas Marston, 17 July 2016. Tony and Alison Price's last service before retirement.