

Sunday 4th February 2018
2 before Lent (B)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Proverbs 8.1, 22-31

NT: Colossians 1.15-20

G: John 1.1-14

Imagine the horror of preachers up and down the country who turned to their Bibles earlier this week to look at today's readings. Most Bible passages only crop up on Sunday mornings every three years, so there is plenty of scope for saying something new; but this morning's Gospel reading is that great passage from the beginning of John, and it is only 6 weeks since we all preached on that passage at Christmas! Whether you have been keeping Dry January, or just noting the evenings getting lighter, most of us are not in the mood to think about Christmassy messages again. But we have two distinct themes given to us before Lent: this week we are thinking about Creation, and next week about the Transfiguration.

And the readings for today's Creation theme are not completely random, because they all fit in with each other rather nicely. St Paul writes in today's reading from Colossians; "Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation." This sets the scene for all our readings, exploring the interwoven ideas of God taking flesh as Jesus, and Jesus as the author of Creation. It was today's Bible passages, and especially the first reading from Proverbs, which lay behind the great controversies leading up to the Church Council at Nicaea in 325, the condemnation of the heretic Arius, and the emergence of what we now call the Nicene Creed, which we shall recite later in this service. And although the events surrounding the Council of Nicaea were surprisingly exciting, I'm not sure that you want to hear an historical discussion of events which took place 1693 years ago. I shall spare you that, but the main controversies at Nicaea were about the incarnation, which is, of course, the subject of today's Gospel passage. The reading from John gives us a view of the incarnation, the coming of God into the world as Jesus Christ, explaining how Christ existed before all things. These ideas are also picked up in our first reading from Proverbs, which says, "When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought

forth.” But then, says our Gospel, “the Word became flesh and lived among us.” Jesus Christ came into the world, fully human, yet fully divine.

This idea of incarnation is at the centre of Christian belief, but the meaning of the word has more significance than just referring to Jesus Christ. Jesus became human, and so because Jesus was one of us, we are like him. We have something divine about us. The idea is quite strong in the Gospels in some places, perhaps most notably in the tale of the sheep and the goats, where Jesus says “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” There is an essential link between Jesus, God and man, and us. Creator and created.

Great, you are thinking. That’s nice. Perhaps you might even notice a little halo next time you are looking in the mirror. But this relationship between God and humans which was made through Jesus at the incarnation is incredibly significant for how we live our Christian lives – certainly how we live our Christian lives if we take the divine human seriously. Amongst the names of those who have written about Christianity and influenced others by their faith, few people these days have heard of the poet Francis Thompson. But Thompson deserves recognition not just for his own expression of that great theme of today’s Gospel - “the Word became flesh and lived among us” – but also for his own life experience which brought him to this realization. Francis Thompson was born in 1859, and despite a middle class background and an education, he found himself trying to make a living as a writer in London, and only making any money at all by selling matches and newspapers. When he then developed an opium addiction (the crack cocaine of its day!) he ended up homeless and sleeping rough on the streets of London. However, his poetry attracted attention, and although he continued to live a troubled life, he was saved from the despair in which he found himself.

So what about his poetry? I am going to read some lines just from one poem, called *The Kingdom of God*, which draws out this idea of incarnation. He begins by describing the unknowable heaven as something which we can know. Heaven, he says, is not out of reach:

*O WORLD invisible, we view thee,
O world intangible, we touch thee,
O world unknowable, we know thee,
Inapprehensible, we clutch thee!*

Through Jesus we can reach for what is far removed from us. But later in the poem we hear more of the despair of the vagrant. Using an allusion to the story of Jacob's ladder from the book of Genesis, where Jacob dreamed of a stairway leading up to heaven, Thompson makes a physical link between heaven – the place of God – and Charing Cross, where the homeless used to sleep in London.

*But (when so sad thou canst not sadder)
Cry--and upon thy so sore loss
Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder
Pitched betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross.*

But there is more. Thompson places the Jesus of the Gospels right in the heart of this sad place where people are lost and without shelter or food. Jesus, says Thompson, is walking in the midst of where people are at their most distressed, at their most sorrowful.

*Yea, in the night, my Soul, my daughter,
Cry--clinging to Heaven by the hems;
And lo, Christ walking on the water,
Not of Genesareth, but Thames!*

It's a very striking poem, and it is in some ways a more elaborate telling of those Gospel words, "the Word became flesh and lived among us." It also gives us a deeper understanding of incarnation and what it might mean to us as we live out our Christian faith. Thompson takes the Jesus of the Gospels, the Jesus we talk about as being human and living like us in the world, and he puts Jesus in a contemporary setting. He makes the incarnation more real for us, because Jesus Christ is not just a figure of history, but a living person where we are. But not just where we are: Jesus Christ is where Thompson himself found himself sleeping, under the arches at Charing Cross with the homeless.

So everything we already know about the birth of Jesus is summed up here. Jesus is human, he is compassionate, he associates with the poor and the tax collectors and sinners. But of course there is

more than that. The Christmas story tells us not just that Jesus favoured the poor, but also that he was poor. Jesus was born without a home and without riches. What makes this exciting for us, is that it takes Jesus from being someone we read about, to being someone we know, or someone we might meet in the street. Have you met Jesus Christ? Did you welcome him or did you turn from him? Do you walk where he walks? And remember what it says in the letter to the Hebrews, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

Fr Crispin Pailing