

## Sermon, Sunday 11 July 2021

### Mark 6 14- 29 Ephesians 1 v.3-14

**I**n Jesus' time there was a widespread popular belief that the new age which the Jews confidently expected in the near future, would be marked by a miraculous triumph of good over evil. It would be ushered in by one of the great Old Testament figures, Moses, Elijah or one of the old prophets.

**A**s the activity of Jesus seemed to suggest the arrival of the new age, it was natural to identify him with one of these. Since John the Baptist had been in the same tradition it seemed possible that he had come again, as Herod thinks.

**H**erod Antipas had been in charge since the death of his father Herod the Great. He had, whilst returning from Rome, fallen in love with Herodias, the wife of his brother. Herodias left his brother and prepared to marry Herod Antipas, who divorced his wife and duly married Herodias. She brought her daughter Salome with her, who danced erotically before Herod.

**I**n the eyes of strict Jews it was unlawful to marry a brother's wife while he was still alive. This is the background to John the Baptist's public disapproval and Herodias' grudge against him. Hence the story of the fatal banquet and the death of John the Baptist.

**W**e also had that wonderful reading from Ephesians. Paul says "He chose us in Christ to be his people, to be without blemish in his sight, to be full of love." To be full of love; love is the greatest gift we can receive. We are most like Jesus when we love each other and when we love the world.

**L**ove is not just romantic love. It is the complete self-giving love that we see in Jesus. But that should not make us lose confidence. We know that even in our small way, this is the love the world needs if we are to navigate our way through the huge challenges we face.

**F**ollowing Jesus as he confers on us every "spiritual blessing" means being part of this great love affair. "In accordance", says Paul, "with the plan which he determined beforehand in Christ". We become part of his plan, agents of change as we are God's ambassadors for love in the world. And however small or fragile your faith is, most of us have strong feelings of love. They are from God.

**U**se this love to change the world, one heart at a time. God is the one who can change hearts and therefore help us change the world. When we come to God or return to God, or when we hear a passage of Scripture that moves us, we see in each other that love which holds and sustains us. And when we know we are loved the only real response is thankful silence. There is a place beyond words where the heart rests in peace in the knowledge of being known and loved.

**N**ot all of us experience such love in our lives. Some of us have been severely damaged by life's injustices. But the love that comes from Jesus is secure. It is waiting for us - the other side of words. We only need to receive. Paul says, "In Christ our release is secured and our sins forgiven through the shedding of his blood." Christ came to break the shackles of sin, both communal and personal.

**S**o salvation through Christ affects all levels of human existence and we are freed from all our wrongdoing. We act in response to and in cooperation with God. As Augustine says, "Without God we cannot; without us he will not."

**P**aul's letter gives us a broad framework within which to deal with the biggest questions and with the profound longings of the human heart. Paul believes that God has a plan to bring about when the time is ripe, a plan that will bring everything in the universe to a unity in Christ. Paul's vision is immense to speak of uniting all in Christ.

The Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell, has helped me consider these themes. The plan, but can Paul's plan be proved? The demise of belief in God in most Western cultures has often rested on the absence of proof about God. But that proof could never be available in ways that brook no objection. God is not something inside the universe that we are capable of observing and therefore able to prove exists.

**H**owever we can't disprove God either. When we did believe in God and when we believed that God was the source and origin of everything, we did then feel some sort of responsibility to God. And when we believed that God could guide and shape our life on earth we tended to have a greater sense of responsibility in relation to others and in relation to the world.

**W**hen we believe as Paul says, that God's purpose is everywhere at work and when we set our hope on Christ, we don't just think of ourselves as isolated and self-determining individuals. We know that we are part of a created order, we have allegiance to God and benefit from living life the way God intends. We also have a greater sense of belonging to each other. When we stop believing in this way and believing that we are creatures, (part of a created earth, created with purpose by God), it accelerates the tendency to treat the earth as though it belongs to us.

**T**he climate emergency that we face is partly due to a set of attitudes about the earth that we seem incapable of relinquishing. Paul's vision is not impossible. Look at the Roman Catholic social teaching that emerged at the end of the 19th century and its justice and peace movement. Its principles include the dignity of labour, the value of hard work, the universal distribution of goods, reminding us that our possessions are not really our own, but gifts from God.

**T**he common good - that is the concern that everyone in the human household flourishes. Solidarity, reminding us that we belong to one another irrespective of ethnicity, language, religion, education, sex or status. All of these principles are a great encouragement that the dream of unity in the world is worth pursuing and its principles are the principles of God's kingdom.

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