

Sermon for Evensong on the First Sunday after the Epiphany, 13th January 2019

*Isaiah 55:1-11; Romans 6:1-11*

What difference does it make? You know, being a Christian. We are past the lovely Christmas baby-fest. Now what difference does God-with-us, Emmanuel, make?

Isaiah is saying to the Israelites, come back to the true God. Don't follow pagan idols.

'Why spend money and get what is not bread,  
why give the price of your labour and go unsatisfied?  
Only listen to me and you will have good food to eat,  
and you will enjoy the fat of the land.  
Come to me and listen to my words,  
hear me, and you shall have life:  
I will make a covenant with you, this time for ever,  
to love you faithfully as I loved David' [Is. 55:2-3, NEB]

Salvation is coming. The Messiah will come. He will not be what you expect - he will be like a suffering servant, even - 'despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief' [Is. 53:3f]. But 'all we like sheep have gone astray'. You can hear Handel's 'Messiah' in it - but you mustn't be seduced by the beautiful music into not hearing the Bible underneath.

It's the major theme of much of the Old Testament. The chosen people, the Israelites, 'like sheep have gone astray'. They have worshipped false gods. Isaiah asks, 'Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labour for that which satisfieth not?'

We can recognise ourselves a bit in this, even though it was written nearly 3,000 years ago. Your eyes will probably glaze over

if I say this. Yeah, yeah. Of course we shouldn't get hung up on new cars and posh extensions to our houses. But - we do. What harm does it do? Worse things happen at sea.

Well, Isaiah said to the Israelites, according to some scholars about 700BC, that they needed to 'Seek ye the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near:

Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord.' It could still be valid for us today.

Because what the Israelites were doing was sin; they were sinning against the one true God. But he offers them a second chance. 'Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.'

Sin is, in a sense, doing bad things. But underpinning that is the reason that something is sinful. It is, that it shows that the sinner is turning away from, is separated from, God. So if you steal, or envy someone their things, or elope with their wife, those are bad things, but they are also sins, because you are going against God's commandments. 'If ye love me, keep my commandments' [John 14:15f].

But in our other reading, from St Paul's Letter to the Romans, we have flashed forward 700 years from Isaiah, to the time of Jesus, and St Paul. Isaiah's prophecies have come true. The Messiah has come. This morning in our services we were marking the Baptism of Christ. Christ meeting the last of the prophets, John the Baptist. You might perhaps think that because of the story of Jesus, there isn't any need to bother with the Old Testament, with 60+ chapters of Isaiah and things, any more. But remember that Jesus himself said, 'Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am come not to destroy, but to fulfil.' (Matt. 5:17). So

when the dove came down on Jesus after his baptism in the River Jordan, and the voice from heaven said, 'Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased', it was a pivotal moment, joining the prophetic time with the incarnation of God on earth.

Paul made powerful use of baptism in his preaching to non-Jews. Baptism was a ritual common in Greek cults as well as in Christianity. 'To his pagan converts it appealed as a sacrament parallel to those of the Greek mysteries' (C.H. Dodd, 1950 (1920), *The Meaning of Paul for Today*, Glasgow, Wm Collins Sons and Co, p.130). In the Greek mysteries, by performing sacramental acts 'spiritual effects could be obtained' (Dodd).

Running through St Paul's letters is the idea of the Christians being 'in Christ', intimately bound up with Christ. So, in a sense, Christ's baptism was a symbol of being dead and then resurrected; going down into the water and then rising up out of it. By being baptised 'along with' or 'into' Christ, Christians were symbolically sharing in his death and resurrection.

At the same time, there was a problem: even after being baptised, Christians were still human, they still did sinful things. Paul said that we need to be 'dead to sin' in the way that Jesus was. That is, as Jesus died, he couldn't be prey to sinful influences. He was 'dead to sin'. So as a Christian, if I am 'alive to Christ', baptised, sacramentally dead and resurrected with him, I too should be 'dead to sin'.

But it isn't magic. It's a sacrament. The essence of a sacrament is that it is 'an outward visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace', as the Catechism in the BCP puts it (p294 of the Cambridge edition). It's worth reading this bit of the Catechism. Things aren't as fierce today as they were in the 16th century, when the heading to the Catechism in the BCP was 'an Instruction to be learned of

every Person before he be brought to be confirmed by the Bishop'. That is, learned by heart, at about 10 years old...

Anyway, if you're up for it, this is what you have to learn about being baptised.

'Question.

How many parts are there in a Sacrament?

Answer.

Two: the outward visible sign, and the inward spiritual grace.

Question.

What is the outward visible sign or form in Baptism?

Answer.

Water: wherein the person is baptized, In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

Question.

What is the inward and spiritual grace?

Answer.

A death unto sin, and a new birth unto righteousness: for being by nature born in sin, and the children of wrath, we are hereby made the children of grace.

Question.

What is required of persons to be baptized?

Answer.

Repentance, whereby they forsake sin: and faith, whereby they stedfastly believe the promises of God, made to them in that Sacrament.'

'A death unto sin, and a new birth unto righteousness'. That's what you get in Christian baptism. But just as sin doesn't just mean doing bad things, so conversely, being a child of grace doesn't mean just going with the flow, being baptised and doing nothing in consequence of it. You need repentance, μετάνοια, change of mind, as a prerequisite.

Paul has posed the problem, the puzzle. Why is there still sin around, or rather, can we still get away with committing sins, after we have been baptised? Indeed, he starts with a rather nerdy argument that sounds as though it has come out of a philosophy essay, to the effect that we need to carry on sinning in order to demonstrate by contrast the weight of grace which we have got. It's almost like saying you can't understand what it is to be black unless you have white as well.

Paul answers his puzzle not philosophically, but by explaining how we are joined with Christ in the sacrament. Dead with him; dead to sin. Alive, resurrected, with Christ. So, I come back round to my original question. 'What difference does it make? You know, being a Christian. We are past the lovely Christmas baby-fest. Now what difference does God-with-us, Emmanuel, make?'

This is tough stuff. It really means that, if we put our heads above the parapet and let people know that we are Christians, it should be evident in what we do, evident in how we behave.

It means that in business, if we say that our actions are dictated solely by the need to make value, or profit, for shareholders; or in public affairs, if we say that we would like to do something good, but that money, or the market, dictates otherwise; if we see poor people risking their lives to escape poverty and danger, and try to keep them out instead of giving them a place of refuge; in all those cases, we will show ourselves as still not being dead to sin and alive to Christ.

Think of Jesus' teaching. God and mammon: the good Samaritan; the prodigal son; giving and not counting the cost. As Jesus said just before he was baptised, in St Luke's Gospel, 'The man with two shirts must share with him who has none, and anyone who has food must do the same.' It's not enough - although it's a good start

- just to go to church. Think what you have to do, to really do, in order to be really dead to sin.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant