

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday before Lent – St James, Cambridge

The Revd Deborah Ford- 9.2.14

Lectionary Texts: Isaiah 58:1-9

Psalm 112

1 Corinthians 2:1-12

Matthew 5:13-20

- Last week, as we celebrated Jesus' presentation in the Temple in the Feast of Candlemas, we heard those wonderful words of Simeon. The old man known for his faithfulness and justness, who'd been promised he would not see death until he had seen the Lord's Christ...
- And when, guided by the Spirit, so he is there when that moment finally comes, and he recognises and takes the baby Jesus in his arms, he can't help bursting out:

“Now Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace; according to Thy word: for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation, which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people: to be a light to lighten the gentiles and to be the glory of Thy people Israel...” (Luke 2:29-32)

- Simeon has glimpsed something amazing: so amazing that he knows he can now let go into death and all that is yet to come, full of joy, and peace.
- In today's' gospel reading, we hear that same baby - now a grown man - astonishing people with his teaching as God's meaning and purpose are fulfilled further in him: the Word made flesh.
- It's part of Jesus' 'Sermon on the Mount' and Matthew sets the scene with Jesus teaching from a mountain – just as Moses first taught the Israelites from Mount Sinai. Jesus is the new Moses on the mountain, giving the new Law, his face shining.
- And he says: 'Don't think I've come to abolish the Law and the Prophets: I've come to **fulfil** them.
- I wonder what it means? 'I've come to fulfil them'? It 's a strange little word, isn't it, 'fulfil'?

- I think perhaps we tend to use it more in its negative than positive sense: “So and so was dismissed because she couldn’t fulfil her duties...” Or “Sadly so and so wasn’t accepted to do Medicine or Law (or whatever) and fulfil his dreams of a lifetime.”
- But sometimes we do speak about something being particularly fulfilling, don’t we? Whether it’s a job or a relationship or something we’ve achieved.
- I wonder what it means to you? Would you say you’re fulfilled? If so, what’s that about?
- The Greek word it’s translated from is *teleos*: – meaning ‘perfect’, ‘complete’ or ‘whole’.
- Along with other Greek philosophers, Aristotle (who’s shaped so much of our thinking) used it in quite a constrained and linear sense – focussed on achieving a particular goal or purpose. The sort of sense we’ll have reinforced again and again as we watch the different events in the Winter Olympics over the next fortnight. A sense of fulfilment that’s burdened with perfecting certain rituals – set and marked against various standards and criteria in ‘going for gold’.
- But ‘fulfil’ has a much richer and freer meaning, too: more to do with fully realizing or bringing something to fruition. Much less about the ‘end goal’ or ‘outcome’ (however trendy those might be in our task-driven and oriented culture) and much more about going deeper into a quality and depth of relationship and trust: deeper into the *Spirit* of things.
- So I think relationship is a richer way of thinking about it. In many ways, the more you get to know someone, the more of a mystery they become, don’t they? There’s always more – new and hidden depths and things to be discovered and brought into light, as new life constantly bubbles up and comes into being in them and between you both.
- That’s more the kind of fulfilment Jesus is talking about. But because he’s God, it’s even *more* than that, because fulfilment in God, is never-ending:
- It’s about being drawn deeper and deeper into the dynamic between the Father and Son for all eternity – it can only ever be begun in this life - and then carried on for ever and ever.

- Deeper into life, meaning, wisdom, purpose, peace, joy, goodness... The reading from Matthew carries directly on from the Beatitudes, where the Kingdom of heaven is about the poor in spirit receiving the kingdom of heaven... those who mourn receiving comfort, the meek inheriting the earth, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness being filled, the merciful receiving mercy, the pure in heart seeing God, the peacemakers being called children of God... Those things are all promised for those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.
- But without the Spirit, we don't get it: it's beyond us – it doesn't make any sense:

“ No eye has seen, not ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him’...

[Yet] these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit, for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God...no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. (1 Corinthians 2:9-11)

- What an amazing thing, that Jesus has given us his Spirit so we can begin to take in what this fullness of living and loving in God is all about – and understand all the gifts he's bestowed on us. The Spirit that reminds us of what Jesus says and gently leads us deeper into the truth we cannot yet bear.
- The Spirit that draws us deeper into the life and activity of Jesus in us... that simultaneously draws us deeper into relationship with the world. It's the meaning of *koinonia* – living in the fellowship and communion of the Holy Spirit: the mutual indwelling of God.
- It's not about retreating into a privatised spirituality or worship: it means being the body of Christ together and engaging at all levels with the political and socio-economic systems and structures we're part of which dehumanise people and leave them trapped, disempowered, dependent and despairing. When we're swept up into the activity of the Spirit of Christ, we don't even have to think about it – it's a fruit.
- And it *matters!* “Shout out, do not hold back!” God urges Isaiah: “Lift up your voice like a trumpet!” ‘*Tell* them how they're going off track...I've created them all for so much *more* - something so much better! They need to know!’

- Paul's doing the same in his letter to the Corinthians, who are a dynamic, wealthy, gifted community, full of wonderful spiritual experiences... but they haven't yet discovered the gift of poverty or their vulnerability or 'littleness' (as Jean Vanier puts it)... and the freedom and joy of having grateful, generous, secure hearts that come from knowing the deep mercy and compassion of God.
- The Corinthians are in danger of becoming triumphalist and need to therefore be reminded to hold the tension of the crucifixion together with the resurrection: to be open to going the way of suffering, self-sacrifice and discovering the mystery and glory of the cross.... And of course in a few chapters, comes the most remarkable teaching about love... Love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
- It's about being involved with Jesus where Jesus is... and Jesus is always in the midst of brokenness.
- Jesus' own teaching to the disciples is similar: "You are the salt of the earth! Don't lose your saltiness! Don't lose your taste and hunger for God and for God's glory to be revealed.
- Don't underestimate the power of me in and among you! Let me come more and more alive in you! Let your light shine before others so that they may see...and give glory to your Father in heaven!
- I don't know about you, but sometimes I meet people I want to shake up and find the 'fizz' in them sometimes, because they're so 'bland' and 'flat' and one-dimensional – sometimes because they're trying to live according to some image of how they think others want them to be... sometimes because the light and spark in them has been hidden and buried away because of pain and out of fear of further rejection, disappointment and humiliation (in which case, I realise, shaking them up would certainly not be very helpful!).
- I want them to find their passion - the 'spark' within them: the things that really bring them alive and see them energised by the power of God's Spirit in them.
- You can really tell when someone has found that spark, can't you? ... even (or sometimes especially) when they're really going through it: you can see they've been swept up into something so much bigger. And there's something deeply attractive about it.

- When we lived in Birmingham (before we moved to Cambridge), David and I sometimes used to go to a church called Hockley Pentecostal Church. It was a church set up and run by two local women during the war: Miss Fisher and Miss Reeve.
- We used to go some Saturday evenings and it was a modern building (not dissimilar to this one) in the inner city – with a wonderful jazz band and music and songs that went on and on with a great sense of leisure.
- I may have preached here before about the trepidation Miss Fisher used to evoke in me when it came to the ‘call for prayer’ part of the service and her very bold discernment about who needed to come forward for prayer and deliverance.... But Miss Reeve had a different way.
- She was gentler and had lots of variations on one fundamental prophetic theme. It was all about the *feast* God has prepared for us and longs to *lavish* on us...
- She used to say again and again (in a broad Brummie accent) “But you’re getting down from the table and leaving before the next course has been brought to the table! Don’t you realise? Don’t you want *more*? More of what God has prepared for you!”

“No eye has seen, not ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him...” (1 Cor 2: 9)

- Do *we* want more? How do we keep our yearning and taste for God alive? Do we wait, like Simeon, in joyful anticipation and recognition as God’s promises are fulfilled in our midst?
- How do we stay open to letting the Holy Spirit search our depths and the depths of God in us? How do we keep ourselves open and vulnerable to the cries of humanity? So we don’t ‘hide ourselves from our own kin?’
- So as we have the privilege of celebrating this Eucharist together, let’s pray to be filled afresh with the Spirit of the crucified and risen Lord... and as we receive the life of his body and blood in us, to be given a fresh taste and desire for God.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled...” (Matthew 5:6) Amen.

Isaiah 58:1-9 'False and True Worship'

Shout out, do not hold back!

Lift up your voice like a trumpet!

Announce to my people their rebellion,

to the house of Jacob their sins.

² Yet day after day they seek me

and delight to know my ways,

as if they were a nation that practised righteousness

and did not forsake the ordinance of their God;

they ask of me righteous judgements,

they delight to draw near to God.

³ 'Why do we fast, but you do not see?

Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?'

Look, you serve your own interest on your fast-day,

and oppress all your workers.

⁴ Look, you fast only to quarrel and to fight

and to strike with a wicked fist.

Such fasting as you do today

will not make your voice heard on high.

⁵ Is such the fast that I choose,

a day to humble oneself?

Is it to bow down the head like a bulrush,

and to lie in sackcloth and ashes?

Will you call this a fast,

a day acceptable to the LORD?

⁶ Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice,

to undo the thongs of the yoke,

to let the oppressed go free,

and to break every yoke?

⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
⁸ Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the LORD shall be your rearguard.
⁹ Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

Psalm 112 ‘Blessings of the Righteous’

¹ Praise the LORD!
Happy are those who fear the LORD,
who greatly delight in his commandments.
² Their descendants will be mighty in the land;
the generation of the upright will be blessed.
³ Wealth and riches are in their houses,
and their righteousness endures for ever.
⁴ They rise in the darkness as a light for the upright;
they are gracious, merciful, and righteous.
⁵ It is well with those who deal generously and lend,
who conduct their affairs with justice.
⁶ For the righteous will never be moved;
they will be remembered for ever.
⁷ They are not afraid of evil tidings;
their hearts are firm, secure in the LORD.
⁸ Their hearts are steady, they will not be afraid;
in the end they will look in triumph on their foes.
⁹ They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor;

their righteousness endures for ever;
 their horn is exalted in honour.

1 Corinthians 2:1-12 ‘Proclaiming Christ Crucified’

1 When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. ²For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. ³And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. ⁴My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

‘The True Wisdom of God’

6 Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. ⁷But we speak God’s wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. ⁸None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹But, as it is written,

‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
 nor the human heart conceived,
 what God has prepared for those who love him’—

¹⁰these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. ¹¹For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God’s except the Spirit of God. ¹²Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.

Matthew 5:13-20 ‘Salt and Light’

13 ‘You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.
 14 ‘You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

‘The Law and the Prophets’

17 ‘Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. ¹⁸For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.