St Peter’s Cathedral Evensong

Sunday 7 July, 2019

Dr Baden Teague

Readings: Luke 9: 18-21, Matthew 16: 13-20, Mark 8: 27-30, John 6: 66-69

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be inspired by you, God, our Strength and our Redeemer.

**JESUS, YOU ARE THE CHRIST**

Tonight’s Gospel reading describes St Peter’s great exclamation, “Jesus, you are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!” Our Lord’s reply to Peter was this: “I give you the keys to heaven, Peter, for on this confession I will build my Church.”

This Cathedral is called “St Peter’s” because of this event. We have the symbol here of the crossed keys. On the great oak screen, the Reredos, in front of us is carved a picture of Peter looking at Jesus and saying the words, “you are the Christ”.

This event occurred in the middle of the three years of Jesus’ ministry to the apostles – these three years that eventually led to his death on the cross and his Resurrection to life. This event is described in all four of the Gospels:

* The earliest written account is by St Mark. He wrote this: “Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, and on the way he asked them, ‘Who do the people say that I am?’ And they told him ‘John the Baptist, and others say Elijah, and others one of the prophets.’ And he then asked them, but who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered him, ‘You are the Christ’. And Jesus began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things and be killed and after three days rise again.”
* The account by St Matthew confirms and expands this response of Peter. As Matthew records it, Peter said: “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”
* The account by St Luke (our reading tonight) says: “And Peter answered, You are the Christ of God.”
* The fourth account is by St John and it is in a slightly different context. John wrote this: “Some of the disciples of Jesus withdrew and no longer went about with him. Then Jesus said to the twelve apostles, ‘will you also go away?’ Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? **You** have the words of eternal life; and we have believed and have come to know that **you** are the Holy One of God.’”

Now, let us turn to ask some questions about these four Gospel records: what does ‘holy’ mean? And what does ‘Christ’ mean? ‘Holy’ means to be ‘separated’ from sin, or to be dedicated to God, sanctified, becoming a saint. The top quality of God is holiness. In our trinitarian view of God we name ‘God-with-us-now’ as the Holy Spirit.

And what does ’Christ’ mean? It means the Anointed one, the Messiah. We cannot really understand the Greek word ‘Christos’ without first understanding the Hebrew and Aramaic word, ‘Messiah’. God’s promise to Israel of the coming Messiah is deeply embedded in the development of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Messiah is God’s promise. The Messiah has partly a royal sense and hence both the Hebrew phrase ‘son of David’ the greatest King of Israel, and the Roman phrase for Jesus ‘The King of the Jews’. But much more than King, the Messiah means more fundamentally the ‘prophet’ proclaiming God’s revelation of himself in suffering, humiliation and death. But this death eventually leads to life.

This deeply Old Testament view of the Messiah (which becomes the Greek ‘Christos’) as the ‘suffering one’ is fully taken up, for instance, by the great Christian writer, Jurgen Moltmann in his book, “The Crucified God”. This, at first, sounds an appalling concept. It is astonishing that God shows his love for us by suffering, by dying on a cross. God is the lamb slain for us. Moltmann’s classic book shines a great light on this truth that the nature of God is the nature of the Christ who suffers so that we may live. The whole New Testament underlines this emerging truth that God not only is holy, God is love, and love suffers to enable life.

A few weeks ago a friend of mine asked me about how to become a Christian. He admired his own wife’s Christian life and faith but admitted his own life-long scepticism. My response was to suggest that he sit down that evening and read one of the Gospels. I assured him that asking questions is entirely healthy and that even with faith alive and well, we are still asking questions. I asked him to come directly to the person of Jesus and to make his own response to Jesus. What would he come to think of Jesus? Perhaps begin with Matthew’s Gospel and then add John’s Gospel? Would he come to conclude that Jesus is the Christ? Would he come to believe in Jesus and be healed? I suggested that he start reading in chapter one and keep on until the end.

St John’s book is perhaps the most reflective and the wisest of the four Gospels. St John concludes his writing with these challenging words: “Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.”

I should add that my **second** suggestion to my enquiring friend, beside reading one of the Gospels, was to begin to learn about “the promises of God.” That is, that there is a God who becomes known by the fulfilling of promises. I suggested he read the second half of the book of Genesis, beginning from Chapter 12, the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. This is where we first hear about a God who promises.

This Genesis account is fundamental because God reveals himself to ordinary people by promising a blessing and then fulfilling that promise. Abraham responded to this fulfilled promise by coming to believe in God, to trust in God, to have faith. In the case of Jacob (who started out as a scoundrel and a liar), he was transformed by the fulfilled promise of God and he discovered the grace of God. That is, he received God’s gift as a free gift, not earned and not deserved. Incidentally this life-changing experience led to Jacob’s name changing to become ‘Israel’ instead. There are thus strong hints of the new Testament even in this first book of the Bible, Genesis.

Kathy and I have an American friend, Ellen Charry, who spoke very movingly in this Cathedral a few years ago. Ellen was an orthodox Jew who in mid-life explored the Gospels to discover that Jesus fulfilled the promises of God. She discovered that Jesus is the Christ. She is now a very happy person and is Professor of Christian Theology at Princeton Seminary, perhaps the most resourced School of Theology anywhere today in the world. Ellen responded to Jesus as the one who has enlarged and fulfilled all that the Hebrew Scriptures had begun to proclaim. She continues to have a wonderful experience of the Two Testaments enlightening each other.

The Greek word ‘Christos’ (which is our word, ‘Christ’) occurs 54 times throughout the four Gospels and then is used over 200 times in the writing of St Paul. It is Paul’s Christian theology which **explains** how it is that Jesus is Christ and what these truths mean for a Christian’s life and behaviour. St Paul emphasised the concept “en Christu”, in Christ, as almost a physical reality. The Christian is ‘in Christ’ and Christ is in the Christian. God is with us and we are with God. The Holy Spirit is a living experience. It was probably this emphasis which led in the first century to the followers of Jesus being called Christians.

My simple sentences here tonight try to abbreviate the insights of the Christian Gospel. This Gospel is “Good News” in that in Jesus Christ we see the revelation of God and know the healing of God. Our prayer this evening is that, like St Peter, we all may say, “Jesus, you are the Christ”.