

Sermon 21st July 2024
Great St Mary's 10.30am Sung Eucharist

Trinity 8

Jeremiah 23:1-6 (Woe to the shepherds...)

Eph 2:11-end (Christ as the Cornerstone)

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56 (they were like "sheep without a shepherd"...and the healing of the crowds)

Opening prayer.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of (all our) hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. (Ps 19)
Amen.

Many of you here will remember with fondness the Radio 4 series "Something Understood", a series presenting ethical and religious topics and broadcast twice on Sundays at the extreme ends of the day.

Others might recognise the phrase "Something Understood" as the name of the poetry group associated with Great St Mary's which meets monthly. In both cases the name was inspired by the last line of a remarkable poem called "Prayer" by the 17th century Cambridge scholar, University Orator, parish priest and poet, George Herbert.

Herbert's poem is remarkable in that it presents a single idea only. The poem simply consists of a stream of metaphors, or symbolic descriptions, of prayer. There is no development of ideas, but just image tumbling upon image, each one revealing the complexity and richness of this most human but most divine of activities.

Here are but a few of some of the ideas Herbert presents for prayer: I'll say them slowly so they can sink in. Perhaps when they are read, notice how you react to them. Some might resonate more than others.

Heaven's Banquet

God's breath in man, returning to its birth.

Engine against the almighty

Reversed thunder

A kind of tune
The bird of paradise
The land of spices
and
Something understood.

And yet, none of these say in a direct way what prayer actually is...its almost as if they are avoiding the obvious literal description such as is found in the dictionary. The definition in the Oxford English Dictionary rather predictably begins "Prayer: a solemn request to God..."

And yet when presenting spiritual ideas, I want to suggest that metaphors express something which a literal description can never capture. I wonder if hearing any of Herbert's descriptions for prayer evoked an emotion? I found that two of Herbert's ideas for prayer, firstly his "a kind of tune," (with its suggestion that God hears music when we pray), and the mysterious promise of the "land of spices," were each profoundly evocative. Perhaps the most moving for me is his very simple, "something understood"...indicating that our clumsy offerings make sense to a loving God who is always listening.

I now want to make a connection between the language of poetry and that of the Bible. Some people like to consider the Bible as "the maker's instructions," and yet for the large part you will not find within it the reassuringly logical series of statements which we might find in a instruction manual such as a cookbook or a furniture kit or a scientific text. Instead, the bible is a collection of different writings, in different styles (and for examples of the variety we can simply consider our three very different readings today). And in the Biblical texts we often find statements which are mysterious, ambiguous or even contradictory if taken literally. As in Herbert's poem, many Bible passages are laden with symbolic descriptions, in other words, metaphors, rather than clear instruction.

Unlike the logical detail found in an instruction manual, a metaphor appeals to our intuition and imagination, and offers a gap between the words used and the meaning which we take from them. The gap means that something new can emerge for each of us; each interpretation is unique and might be strikingly different from that of another person. And I would suggest also that on a spiritual

topic, such as prayer in Herbert's poem or in any reading of the bible, that if we are open to it, the Holy Spirit will come into that gap and further influence our interpretation of the words. Just as St Paul wrote to Timothy regarding the Hebrew Scriptures, such texts become "living and active". They are by no means a dry instruction manual, and it is why we can return to scriptures again and again and discover something new each time.

In our readings today we can discover a number of metaphors which relate to Christ. Both Jeremiah and Mark offer the moving and treasured image of the Messiah being like a Shepherd who is concerned for lost sheep and who will gather the sheep back into the fold, tend them and heal them. Jeremiah also describes the Messiah as a righteous Branch...a descendant of the family tree of David. He then presents the Messiah as a wise and righteous King and defender of the people. We are familiar with all these images of Christ, and I am sure we find them moving and enriching. These descriptions are giving us ideas about Jesus which, with the help of the Holy Spirit, can only enliven our understanding of accounts of his life and teaching which we find in the Gospels.

What I would like to leave you with today is a reflection a yet different picture for Christ which appeared in our second bible reading, and its one which is possibly inspired by the ancient scriptural poetic description of God as a Rock. In the letter entitled Ephesians (which may actually have been written by a follower of Paul rather than Paul himself), the author is reminding the believers of the newly founded churches of the late 1st century, that, in Christ, the previously pagan Christians, the Gentiles, are now as one with the Jews. What divided these groups of people, the Judaic law and the marking of this with male circumcision, has, in Christ, been abolished.

The author looks to the architecture of the religious temples of the day, possibly even pagan temples. Christ is the cornerstone. In Greek, literally, the word means "extreme corner". This term indicates that cornerstones are at the extremities of buildings...and in this building, we might consider those huge weightbearing blocks at the base of the four external corners of the church, or also the stones at the extreme corner of the apex of the arches... and we can all recognise how fundamental they are to holding the building together. And Paul extends his metaphor, not only is Christ the weightbearing cornerstone, but, the people who formerly were in such profound disagreement (about interpretation of scripture,

ways of worshipping, what to eat and dearly held ethical values) are the walls and other structures, built together in Christ. A cornerstone brings together two walls which are travelling in different directions. And what happens in a building like this, is not that those differences are cancelled out, but instead they are celebrated. The joy of being in a sacred space such as this church is that we have structures around us radiating in all the directions and we can experience the miracle that they are stable and enduring. Whilst it has been built upon since (and will surely continue to be so), the body, the nave of this building, was standing well before George Herbert's time, and he surely as Orator, would have preached here. He too would have been moved, like the hundreds of tourists who pass through its doors daily, by its strength and beauty.

So, when we despair of the differences which separate us as humans and particularly as a church, this profound metaphor of Christ as the cornerstone of a spiritual temple is one to return to.

We are called in Christ to be one, but **not** all the same. Our differences (which may feel so important to cause us to want to separate from others or to reject them) ideally enrich and strengthen us, and can serve, just as we experience in our democratically elected parliament, to offer checks and balances against our more extremist tendencies. But enrichment in the face of differences can only happen if in our differences we remember Him who unites us in love and grace, and that is Jesus Christ. We are first called to love our neighbour irrespective of all differences, whilst seeking always to discern which differences are a gift to the diverse body of Christ, and which are to be challenged, in love.

Let us consider these walls around us which each radiate towards a corner. Each is different and occupies a unique space, but is brought into close contact with at least one other through the cornerstones. May each of us today be given deeper insight into this architectural vision of the people of God, (that is, each one of us), being built together in a structure which is sacred and welcoming to others... just as is this building... held together in Christ, and always growing... and may we always focus first, not upon our differences, but upon Christ as the cornerstone who unites us. Amen.