

Sermon for Sunday 25th October 2020 Bible Sunday

Using lessons Colossians 3.v.12-17 and Matthew 24.v.30-35

“Embrace the dark days with light. Candles can make life a bit more enjoyable”

The candle industry knows this to be true.

Some counsellors know this to be true, too, because they have made their living using this technique to offset the effects of depression, helping people to be better at home with themselves.

The Church (through its belief) offers hope for free using this symbolism of the candle to represent the Light of Christ still coming amongst us with a Word to lighten our burdens for all who are weary and heavy laden-AND I WILL GIVE YOU REST.-to foreshadow a new life.

The Bible reveals the story of this Word that, through its words and the practice of its sacraments, believers can be at home with God who (in the words of Martin Israel) is “nearer to you than your own sense of identity, standing perpetually at the door and knocking so that he may enter-waiting for your invitation”. In following Christ (the Word), we try to open our hearts, and minds and souls to make that invitation. Today, then, we are particularly encouraged to read the Word, pray the Word and practice the Word like the Christians in Colossae, trying to adopt the almost impossible life style of loving God and neighbour fully by balancing it with singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs in gratitude. This is advice that they received from St Paul-and we in turn have also received-through the inexhaustible love of God. We may have something to learn here, but in the current circumstances of coronavirus restrictions this is limited. We have learned silent reading. Now we must learn to silent sing! We do this in our hearts!

In the review of a new book (Christ Unabridged: knowing and loving the Son of Man edited by George Westhaver and Rebekah Vince SCM Press) there is a comment which rather struck a chord with me:

“Simply repeating what has been given to us (without thinking it through anew) is insufficient for a true understanding of God and His Christ”

I am reminded of a story of a young professional singer on his way to perform at a concert.. He is overtaken by a blizzard, and shortly finds his car in a snow drift. He gets out, and struggles towards a light shining through the trees. It just happens to be a small monastery. He’s welcomed in, warmed, joins the brothers at the meal who become bold enough to ask why he is dressed in evening suit, dress shirt and bow tie. He explains that he was on his way to perform and has now missed the concert. “Then you must sing for us” they said. With almost perfect intonation, he sings “The Lord’s my shepherd” the 23rd Psalm to the tune Crimond. He is applauded. “It’s our custom at evening meal, if we have guests, to entertain, too” the guestmaster said. An old brother rises to his feet. He, too, uses the same psalm, looking far into the distance (as if to another world) and quietly and unassumingly prays God’s praise.

“I KNEW THE SONG BUT HE KNOWS THE SHEPHERD” the young singer comments. Your brother lacks nothing!!

I learned that psalm (along with many others) when I was at Primary School, aged 7! Friday afternoons we did Scripture. . It has taken me many years to appreciate how many pearls were cast before us so long ago. What amazes me is, not only could I learn them by heart, but that I can still remember them! JUST! I daresay many of you identify with that exercise-and, perhaps, still try as we all “read, mark, learn and inwardly digest” the

treasures of Scripture with all their hope-and yet, maybe, still don't fathom fully what it's about, WHO it's about or WHO it is that speaks that hope through all those words-remembered and forgotten.

But here is something we can all do. For example, I can still hear Harold, with his sonorous farmer's voice reading from his chosen Bible (King James-AV), 1 Corinthians 13 "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels.....and have not love..... For now we see through a glass darkly, but then, face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know as also I am known". Sometimes he'd come with The New English Bible saying "I didn't understand what the old words meant"-can I use this, Rector?

I might, these days, quite easily trade that for the version in Peterson's "The Message (The New Testament in Contemporary Language):-

"If I speak with human eloquence and angelic ecstasy.....and have not love..... We don't see things clearly! We're squinting into a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright! We'll see it all then"

What ever version you may wish to use (and there are many-take your favourite passages and explore) there's such hope expressed through them, that God's love may dwell in you so richly and take root in your praying that "His will be done on earth as it is in heaven" through His Love extended through you as you come to know him better in word and deed. -"personally in person" as Catarella might well say to Inspector Montalbano.

The Bible also lays the groundwork for other literature, poems, novels, art, music, sculpture-all creativity even your own. And we can even better appreciate them all by reflecting on their source. Where would Shakespeare have been without the Bible for some of his themes and quotes? As you know, in this period of isolation, I have discovered the riches of George Herbert, especially his insights into the God he clearly knew. Here's one of my favourite poems. I will give this poetical conversation between God and himself to you in full:-

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back, Guiltie of dust and sin
But quick-eyed love, observing me grow slack From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning If I lack'd anything.

A guest, I answered, worthy to be here: Love said, you shall be he.
I the unkinde, ungratefull? Ah, my deare, I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply, Who made the eyes but I?

Truth, Lord but I have marred them: let my shame Go where it doth deserve.
And I know you not, says Love, who bore the blame? My deare, then will I serve
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
SO I DID SIT AND EAT.

Clive James, the Australian poet etc. comments in his very productive dying time:
ALMOST NOTHING HAS HAPPENED, EXCEPT EVERYTHING HAS.

God becomes known in all his fullness through his meat (words, bread and wine, fellowship) -his presence seen in his Christ, through whom his Kingdom came near by His cross and resurrection exemplifying the justice and equity that overflow from his most gracious sacrifice and will. No wonder we pray that "We thank God for the gift of His Holy Word"

BUT

Our desire is to know God and His Christ. In this desire is our hope.

I began with the inspiration a lighted candle can give us.

It inspires us to think of the Light of Christ.

Prayerfully, we can be drawn into that Light.-the Light of the World-as we invite him in to our lives. But if I didn't say that the Bible is full of visions, prophecies and promises which are the New Covenant (as we find in Matthew's Gospel reading for today)- and much more of the world God desires for us, I would be remiss. I would not be giving you anything to think about, any sort of guide into the fullness of God's love and His heavenly home even where we belong on earth. If there is a requirement placed upon us (and some would call that repentance-because that's what he called it) we may say-like the prodigal son-that "we have to come to ourselves". But the Father welcomes us back into his home, and kills the fatted calf for us out of love for us. Have you ever wondered what that son did for the rest of his life? People who have had a near-death experience or have been rescued from the jaws of death or discover they've been saved from the terrors of life often find themselves changed in how they treat others and the world-we hear it in a simple comment "I want to give something back" .We give our thanks back to God!

If we can believe, as others have,(and this is writ large in the Bible) that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ-through his grace, our prayer must always be "May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all-evermore".

ALMOST NOTHING HAPPENS BUT EVERYTHING DOES.

For, all our tears will be wiped away

There will be no more wringing of hands

There will be no more shielding

And the untouched will be touched again

And we shall sing again and receive Him again

For the former things will have passed away

And we shall know Him (unmasked) even as we are known (unmasked too)

For nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Believed still only in part.....BUT THEN?

SO EMBRACE EACH DAY WITH THE LIGHT AND DISCOVER WHAT IS IN STORE.

Revd Chris Fletcher