

Advent 3 Year A 2019

There is a true story told about an ordination retreat led by the 19th century biblical scholar and Bishop of Durham, Brooke Foss Westcott. He discovered that five of those to be ordained priest had turned up to the retreat without a Greek New Testament. Bishop Westcott was furious and said to them: “It seems to me incredible that you should come without it; even when going away for an evening you should have your Greek New Testament.” You will gather from this vignette that Westcott was passionate about the scriptures so much so that he believed that every detail of the text mattered – every syllable and every word has the capacity, if we work hard enough, he said, to reveal to us something of the glory of God.

And this insight about the minutiae of scripture is important for us this morning. On Advent Sunday two weeks ago, we began a new church year in which we focus on the Gospel of Matthew. And Matthew’s Gospel begins with this sentence: “The book of the birth of Jesus Christ.” And if, as Westcott suggests, we pay careful attention to the text we discover that the Greek word for birth is genesis – so Matthew’s gospel actually begins with this phrase: “The book of the genesis of Jesus Christ”. And the implications of that word “genesis” are fascinating. It echoes other parts of the NT in

suggesting that the birth of Jesus marks the start of a new creation and a new world in various ways.

First, we can apply this idea to the renewal of the natural world. In our OT reading from the prophet Isaiah we were given a two-part environmental report. It described the natural world that surrounded God's people in exile, and which mirrored their feelings of emptiness. For the land where they lived was a fruitless wilderness, a barren dry land. And later in the passage Isaiah returns to this theme describing the burning sand and the parched ground that must have seemed so oppressive to the Israelites living as refugees. But, with the coming of the Lord to save all that will change; everything will be made new – waters will break forth in the wilderness; the dry land will burst into blossom; it's as if the created world is overwhelmed with joy and breaks forth into singing – as it did in the first genesis when the morning stars sang together,

And for Matthew it is Jesus who brings about this genesis – this birth of a new world and a new creation. And that is a word we need to hear. We have, quite rightly, a deep concern about the natural world and the effects of climate change at the present time. A recent paper on Northern Nigeria reported that 35,000 hectares of arable land are being lost each year to the

encroachment of the desert. Isaiah's dry land and burning desert are a growing reality there. And we know that we have to change the way we are living if this trend is to be reversed whether that means flying less, using less plastic or eating less red meat and planting more trees. But today's reading gives us hope that we are not alone in this. The creation is the Lord's and the coming of Jesus is not just about redeeming humanity but also about healing creation. Isaiah tells us very firmly that it is the Lord who saves. So, to use an old adage, we need to pray as if everything depended on God and work as if everything depended on us.

Secondly, though, in Matthew's narrative the genesis of Jesus marks a new creation for broken humanity as well as for a groaning creation. One of the reasons that Bishop Westcott insisted that we study every word and syllable of scripture with attention is that God is so often strange to us – the revelation of God's saving presence is not what we expect. And this was certainly true even for someone of the stature of John the Baptist. In our gospel reading we heard of John languishing in prison beset by doubts. And his doubts seemed to have been fuelled by expectations which were not being fulfilled by Jesus. For instance, John fasted frequently whilst Jesus was described as a glutton and a drunkard. John called the corrupt

like Herod to account for their actions whilst Jesus sat and ate with tax collectors and sinners. John proclaimed that the one to come would burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire yet Jesus came proclaiming the mercy of God and telling people to love their enemies.

Jesus seemed at one level not only a disappointment to John's expectations but even appeared to be undermining the prophet's message of judgement. So, from his prison cell John sends his followers to ask: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" And Jesus answers John by pointing him to the fruits of his ministry – the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear and the dead are raised – a broken humanity is being made new. Here is the witness of a more ancient vision which we heard in this morning's reading from Isaiah regarding the credentials of the Messiah which John had forgotten.

And this question of expectations and being alert to the strangeness of God is a theme of the whole of Matthew's gospel. For Matthew, Jesus came to usher in the new world of the Kingdom of Heaven – to make known the infinite life of God to finite human beings. But the finite and infinite do not sit very easily with each other and it's a tension that is present

throughout the gospel. So, we find Matthew proclaiming the genesis of Jesus – God with us – in the mystery of a virgin birth which left Joseph perplexed and initially out of his depth. Later in the gospel, after Jesus had given the sermon on the mount, we are told that he “came down from the mountain”. Jesus’ descent from the mountain is another echo of the OT episode when Moses came down the mountain after receiving the Ten Commandments. But when Moses descended from the mountain the people of God could not look at his face because it shone so brightly with the glory of God (Exodus 34). We would expect something even more glorious with the descent of Jesus. And yet surprisingly in the verses that follow Jesus’ glory is veiled. The only people who perceive the power and the glory of Jesus are outsiders – a leper, a Roman Centurion, a Syrophenician woman – people outside the covenant of faith who had no presuppositions or expectations.

And there is a warning to us here who belong to the household of faith. We can never assume that we know what is going on with God, or how he works or know what difference his presence will make in the world. Rowan Williams once put it like this: “The Lordship of Jesus is the Lordship of a riddler, one who makes us strangers to what we think we know.” That’s

how it was for John the Baptist in prison and it can be like that for us too.

And that means in this Advent season what is required of us is to wait in faith even though we do not know the way, or do not understand how the new creation of Jesus is being made present in the current turmoil of the world. For Advent is given to us so that, in the words of today's epistle, we might wait, alert and patient, taking the long view like a farmer looking for the rains that will bring new life to a parched land. And we have to be alert so we do not miss the Lord working his purpose out in ways that are surprising or unexpected. And yet, if as Bishop Westcott suggests we study every word and syllable of scripture, we may still catch echoes of God's power and glory from the past that will help us make sense of the genesis of his kingdom in the present.