

Revelation and Conversion

A sermon preached at St David's, Exeter and St Michael's, Mount Dinham

Sunday 27 January 2019 on the fourth Sunday of Epiphany

Readings: 1 Corinthians 12: 12-31 & Luke 4: 14-21

I don't know if it's the same in your home, but by the twelfth day of Christmas we are well and truly ready to put the Christmas decorations in the loft for another year. Its lovely to have them up to celebrate Christmas but feels quite good to get them cleared away even though the house feels rather bare when they've gone.

So it can feel a bit odd to come to church and see the Nativity/Crib still standing there all the way through January up to Candlemas, which we'll be celebrating next Sunday. It feels a bit of an effort to keep the Christmas spirit going in Church through the Sundays of Epiphany.

But I have come to value this season of Epiphany because it allows time to reflect on the meaning and implication of Christmas, of God being born into this world. 'Veiled in flesh the Godhead see' says the Christmas hymn. During the weeks of Epiphany we see the veil gradually lifted as the nature of Jesus became known to those around him.

On Friday we celebrated the conversion of St Paul and the dramatic story of his conversion. Bill Pattison, who was leading Morning Prayer for us, read a lovely and characteristic poem by John Betjeman called 'The Conversion of St Paul' in which Betjeman reflects that for many of us faith doesn't come as a sudden revelation:

What is conversion? Not at all
For me the experience of St Paul,
No blinding light, a fitful glow
Is all the light of faith I know
Which sometimes goes completely out
And leaves me plunging into doubt
Until I will myself to go
And worship in God's house below —
My parish church — and even there
I find distractions everywhere.

What is Conversion? Turning round
To gaze upon a love profound.
For some of us see Jesus plain
And never once look back again,
And some of us have seen and known

And turned and gone away alone,
But most of us turn slow to see
The figure hanging on a tree
And stumble on and blindly grope
Upheld by intermittent hope
God grant before we die we all
May see the light as did St Paul.

Research suggest that for most people conversion is a process taking months or years. We could say it is a process that takes our whole life, as we turn each day to follow Jesus anew and to look for his grace in our lives. So to focus on the revelation of Jesus and to consider what it means for our lives four weeks at the beginning of each year is not too long!

That revelation begins at Epiphany itself with the arrival of the Magi signalling that Jesus has not just come to be the Saviour of his own people but of all the nations. The baptism in the Jordan provides public confirmation of the Sonship of Jesus when the voice sounds from Heaven ' This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased'.

Then when Jesus turns water into wine at Cana we sense the converting power which his presence can have in our lives. When the wine runs out in our lives and we hit hardship, sickness or bereavement there is one who is with us, ready to turn the water of our disappointments and sorrows into the rich wine of his mercy, grace and forgiveness.

And on this final Sunday of Epiphany we see Jesus revealed as the one who has come to fulfil what God had spoken through the prophets. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." "Today" say Jesus, "This scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing". Jesus is revealed as Good News for the whole world and especially for the needy.

But this revelation of Jesus as fulfilment of the prophets also comes with a challenge. As members of the Church we are the body of Christ. As people upon whom God Spirit's rests we have been commissioned through our baptism. That scripture which was fulfilled in the Synagogue still needs to be fulfilled in us.

The task may seem overwhelming; how can we possibly be good news for the poor or help to release the captives. We need to remember that it is not just for us as individuals but for the Church as a whole to fulfil this commission. Yet as individuals and church congregations we can play our part. We can be good news for the poor through our Soup kitchen and Food Bank collections, through support of the YMCA, Christian Aid and so many other charities.

We can help those in captivity through the Angel Tree charity providing Christmas presents for prisoners to give their children, through Amnesty International or through supporting those we know suffering from addictions. There are countless ways that through personal kindness, community action and service or political involvement that we can be part of the fulfilment which Jesus inaugurated.

So during these weeks of Epiphany the veil is lifted for us as we appreciate the richness and glory that has come to us in Jesus. We can be part of that continuing Epiphany when we play our part in fulfilling the prophecies of Good News. We can be nourished when we come together in worship and feast on the bread and wine of the altar. We can know that Good News for ourselves when we faithfully turn day by day to Christ and seek to complete the task of our conversion. So far from lasting 4 weeks the Epiphany of Jesus will carry on as long as there are Christians in the world.

I'd like to finish with some words of Oscar Romero the Archbishop of San Salvador who was martyred in 1980 for his advocacy for the poor of his country. Although the injustices of his country were very different, this might also be an appropriate thought for us on this Holocaust Memorial Day:

'If some day they take the radio station away from us,
if they close down our newspaper,
if they don't let us speak,
if they kill all the priests and the bishop too,
and you are left, a people without priests
each one of you must be God's microphone,
each one of you must be a messenger,
a prophet.

The Church will always exist
as long as there is one baptized person.
And that one baptized person who is left in the world
is responsible before the world for holding aloft
the banner of the Lord's truth
and of his divine justice.'

Oscar Romero