

An Address by David James, 22 November 2020 - CHRIST THE KING

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, 18 so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, 19 and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.

The Letter to the Ephesians is a great one to hear at this particular moment, in the middle of a pandemic, nearly 2,000 years after it was first written. It is, as one commentator put it, 'one of the most attractive documents in the NT and one to which many Christians turn when low in spirit'.

So that's my first suggestion to you today, on this Feast of Christ the King; savour this Ephesian letter. Read it slowly, notice the sentences which stay in your mind, dwell on the encouragement that our Lord Jesus Christ offers you through them. Let it be an encounter in which 'the eyes of your heart [are] enlightened.' What a great phrase that is to! It reminds us that our faith is a matter not just of intellect but also one that touches us at a deeper emotional level. As a French philosopher once said, 'The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing about'.

On a day which invites us to reflect on Christ's kingdom I want to suggest that something else we can do is look around us and simply notice its present reality. That's what will encourage us and give us hope and enable us to serve. So where do we look 'with the eyes of our heart'? What do we see?

Well I've been trying to do that lately, partly just as a counterbalance to depressing news items and general doom and gloom. There was for example a very cheerful article I came across which described how a new arrival in Cirencester had been exploring the surroundings with her small daughter when she came across a bench with a bunch of flowers left on it. With it there was a note which said, 'Hello stranger! If you find these flowers they were meant for you. Please take them home and enjoy them, you deserve it.'

I loved that last little phrase especially - 'you deserved it.' 'Amazing grace', said the slave owner, John Newton, 'that saved a wretch like me.' The amazing thing about God's grace is that he distributes it liberally to any and all who happen to come across it and are willing, as it were, to take it home with them. That's what grace is - an undeserved gift, which we've done nothing to earn, but is simply offered out of

love and mercy. So to the eyes of the heart a bunch of flowers left on a bench for an unknown stranger to find is a sign of God's grace in the world.

Then there was the news of a possible vaccine for Covid 19 last week and another one more recently. Even the stock market noticed it, with a phenomenal rise in value based on the hope of a return to a more normal way of life. Many of the big pharmaceutical companies involved in developing vaccines have announced that they will make the vaccines as widely available as possible so that they're not just accessible to the rich who can afford them. Indeed the husband and wife team, Ugur Sahin and Ozlem Tureci, who led the research are dedicated scientists who have explained their drive to find a vaccine was because they 'felt a moral imperative to help the world... there is so much need.'

What does looking at that with the eyes of our heart reveal? Well let's just remind ourselves of the gospel reading for today, probably one of the most influential in the whole Bible because it completely changed the way people regarded one another. In the ancient world, the one Jesus inhabited, it wasn't like that.

In that world the gods were capricious and ruthless, the weak and the poor then were scorned. As Tom Holland in his fascinating book *Dominion* says, '*The starving deserved no sympathy. Beggars were best rounded up and deported. Pity risked undermining a wise man's self-control...Across the Roman world, wailing at the sides of roads or on rubbish tips, babies abandoned by their parents were a common sight. Others might be dropped down drains, there to perish in their hundreds... few had ever queried this practice. Girls in particular were liable to be winnowed ruthlessly.*' Pp121, 125.

'I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was sick and you took care of me.'

Particularly as a result of this one passage Christian congregations in the ancient world became known for the way in which they cared for one another, and even for those who weren't of their number - for he said, 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me.' They built up caring networks so different in character from the world around them that others paid attention and wondered at what - who - motivated them to become so concerned about the welfare of those who had no call upon them by kinship but only through their common humanity.

The great monastic houses of Europe practised this hospitality of welcome and care - '*All guests are to be welcomed as Christ*' says St Benedict in his Rule which

governed the majority of them. And he quotes this passage from Matthew as a back-up to that instruction. Travellers knew they'd be welcomed, given a bed, some food and shelter. People could travel. Trade developed. Not for nothing is St Benedict the patron saint of Europe.

So, looking around, what else do we see? Well there's Children in Need, of course which, when I last looked had raised well over £37 million. Then, different in scale but not in character are the shoe boxes we at St David's are sending to people in Moldova who have so much less than us.

We're inclined to think this is normal, but with the eyes of our hearts enlightened by faith in Jesus Christ we can see God's grace at work. As Jesus' own world shows us, what we now take for granted was once extraordinary behaviour, because it is not as obvious as at first it seems.

Black Lives Matter. You'd have thought that was obvious too, but it clearly isn't. If you were to watch just the first of a series of films called *Small Axe* you'd catch a glimpse of what Britain was like in the 1970s as it follows the protest of West Indian Londoners against prejudice and harassment by the police in a case that became known as 'The Mangrove Nine' after name of the restaurant where they used to gather in community simply to socialise. You don't need to cross to the US to find prejudice. But it was a drama which also revealed the progress we have made in tackling it. I say that without any complacency about much that is still to do in combatting prejudice against any who are different from us or who even simply hold a different view.

But my point is that, looking at others with the eye of the heart enlightened by faith, enables us to change ourselves and to change our world and to see more clearly what mars it. We have recently commemorated once again the turmoil of conflict in two world wars and in conflicts since. But on Sunday, for the first time since 1945 a member of the British Royal Family, the Prince of Wales, joined the President of Germany in laying a wreath of remembrance on that country's special day, in an act of reconciliation. 'God reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us a ministry of reconciliation.' To see that with the eye of our heart enlightened may also invite the question of who, perhaps, do we need to be reconciled to?

In the recent Parish Quiet Day we were led by Penny Warren to think about Celtic spirituality and what it had to offer. And she spoke movingly of 'the love that welcomes, includes, heals, encompasses everything. The light that shines in the

darkness and is never overcome.' We are led out to the edge where we can give ourselves in love and service to creation, to people, to places.

And this thought of hers particularly struck me and I offer it to you again now - 'Dwell on the light not the darkness. Think of God's love in creation not the darkness of humanity's inability to receive it.'

To do that is to look with the eyes of our heart enlightened and know the hope to which we are called.

Or as St Paul tells the Philippians:

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.