

A Comma, not a Full Stop.

Genesis 1
Romans 8
Matthew 6. 25 – end
Minster 19 February 2017

Some wise advice I heard twenty years ago was “Don’t use your last sermon to get even.” No danger of that. There’s too much to be thankful for. It is of course a big day for us, and people have been kind in saying how significant it is for you too, but what’s most important is that today provides a milestone in the amazing story of the churches in this place. Today should be about the life of the people of God here, not about me and Julia, though I know some things are going to be said later on. To adapt the words of Chris Martin of Coldplay this last sermon, is a comma, not a full stop. There are baptisms this afternoon. There is Evensong tonight. The sun will rise tomorrow, and there’s a busy week to come.

As ever the readings chosen for the day do their work wonderfully. They place us on firm foundations, lift our eyes to the horizon, and give us encouragement for the day to day. Today is a day when we should pay the lectionary close attention. Normally Methodists, Anglicans and Roman Catholics, meeting for worship across the world, encounter the same Bible passages week by week. Except today. On the Second Sunday before Lent the Church of England goes it alone and selects readings and prayers on the theme of creation. It is the only time we do this, so it must be important.

Three phrases from the readings seem to me to give security, hope, and challenge as we as the Body of Christ, the People of God in this place, approach the comma, take a pause and ask what God has for us next. “In the beginning...and God saw that it was good” from Genesis 1; “the creation...will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” from Romans 8; and “do not worry about your life...strive first the kingdom of God” from Matthew 6. Foundation: God has made us. Hope: God will redeem the whole creation. Challenge and encouragement: do not worry. Seek the kingdom and all you need will come.

When you minister in a building like this it’s not too difficult to believe in firm foundations and the beauty of creation. I’ve said to various people that when you were ordained in Durham Cathedral, and ministered in Southwell Minster, York Minster and Beverley Minster, the beauty of holiness is almost overwhelming. The huge and challenging privilege in these places has not just been the glory of the architecture, but in recognising the foundations of faith exemplified in their founders and patrons: Cuthbert and Bede in Durham; Paulinus, James the Deacon and William in York; John of Beverley here. Genesis places all human life, all the life of creation, on firm foundations. “In the beginning, God...” We belong.

Remember, though, that Genesis was compiled and shaped during a time when God’s people thought they had lost their place. Many of the Jews sacred writings were brought together during the exile. Genesis is a reaffirmation: we may be lost, uncertain, displaced, dismayed. But “in the beginning God...”. And not only that, but “God saw that it was good”. Especially on Tuesday, the third day, where God saw that it was good twice. Tuesday is a great day for a Jew to get married: the day of double blessing. Where are we in the purposes of God? In a creation brought into being by God, in a creation which is fruitful and wondrous.

Even when it might seem not to be the case. Paul writes to the church in Rome about certainty and uncertainty, wholeness and brokenness, suffering and healing. The wonder of creation cannot blind us to its fractures and groanings. Some of that is down directly to humanity. Some is beyond us. But there are enough glimpses of what it should be to know that, in the purposes of God, creation is straining towards healing. Those purposes are gathered up in Jesus Christ, the author of creation, and in his own body is healing and redemption. In the darkest and most devastating of situations, Jesus Christ enfolds, redeems, heals, forgives, reconciles, makes new, transforms. We can't wait for that to be fully revealed. "It's coming. Hold on." says Paul. That's our hope. "The creation...will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God".

Jesus says that our worries about what will happen next, where our food and clothing will come from, what will happen tomorrow, who the next Vicar will be (well, not that last bit, but you know what I mean)...our worries should be placed in that context. God has made us. God will remake us. Our task now, our to-do list, our strategy and our planning, should be to do what God wants day to day. Who knows what the next few months will be like? Who knows what will be in the next chapter of the life of the people of God here, or wherever God takes us? I don't. But I know I am called to set myself each day to speak and do, and act according to God's direction. To be at God's service.

For us that meant, last year, looking carefully are whether that should be here or somewhere else, and consciously to place ourselves at God's disposal. Hampstead was a genuine surprise, and will bring its own way of being daunting and exciting and overwhelming, however leafy and affluent it may seem. I have never felt equipped to do what God has called me to. But I rejoice in the God who provides firm foundations, gives a vision for the future, and has given the right gifts at the right time to do what we have been called to. That is our challenge and call. Seeking God's kingdom day by day is not an individual thing. It is for the people of God. Not to be worried is not to be complacent either. It is to ensure that everything we do is shaped by God's call.

Sometime around the beginning of the eighth century, a man who looked for God's kingdom above all else came to a clearing in a wood inhabited by beavers, and established a place where he, and others, could seek the will of God. It was not a place to hide from the world, and his seeking God here led him to significant ministry, to engagement with the lowest and highest in his land. We stand, we pray, we worship, where he stood, and prayed and worshipped. It has been the greatest privilege to be a part of that for seven years. Here we have seen the glory of God in the beauty of creation. Here we have glimpsed the hope of glory. And here, together, we have striven for the kingdom of God, engaging with every aspect of our community, low to high, rich to poor.

This is a comma, not a full stop. Julia and I invite your prayers for us, your fellow disciples, as we seek God's kingdom in a new place. We will pray for you, in Routh, and Molescroft, and Woodmansey and Tickton and Beverley. For here we have seen God at work. Long may it be so. Amen.