

SERMON 8 February 2015

[Proverbs 8.1, 22-31; Colossians 1.15-20; John 1.1-14]

“He is the image of the invisible God.” Col. 1:15

INTRODUCTION

Theme: VISIBILITY

Books into films and plays:

Have you read any books that have been made into plays or films?

When you saw the play or film, were the characters anything like you imagined?

Two examples from my personal experience are ‘The Life of Pi’ and ‘Salmon Fishing in the Yemen’.

In a film or play, director has the task of visualising the text - turning the written word into something that can be seen and heard.

Blind people and the work of audio describers in theatres:

For the blind, a visit to the theatre in Sheffield can be enhanced by ‘audio describers’. Gillian Stanley is an audio describer and she explained how she does it to at the lunch club last Wednesday.

We did an exercise where she helped us imagine scenes that we could not see, using the film ‘Chaplin’.

Exercise 1 – We heard the sound only and tried to imaging what was happening. It was pretty difficult – there was a little dialogue but also lots of space with no talking. We could hear people laughing but we had no idea what they were laughing at.

Exercise 2 – We heard the sound and Gillian described what was happening. She asked us to imagine the scenes – which we could now do.

Exercise 3 – We heard the sound and saw the visuals and could compare what we had imagined with Gillian’s description with what was actually happening.

This was an exercise in VISIBILITY.

TODAY’S READINGS

I suggest that our readings today are also about **VISIBILITY**.

“Jesus is the image of the invisible God.” (Col.1:15) - He made God visible to the people who met him when he was on earth.

The Gospel writers try and make Jesus visible to us now - although we cannot see Jesus we can read about him.

So, as when we read a novel, we can imagine the person described in the text.

In turn, this person we are imagining, Jesus, is himself a manifestation of God – this is what we focussed on during Epiphany, following Christmas when we celebrated his birth.

Now we are standing back and getting a much bigger picture, setting the event of Jesus' birth in a much bigger timescale.

We are also being prepared for Lent, Holy Week and Easter by being reminded why Jesus came, why “the Word became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth” (John 1:14), for our salvation, to give us “power to become children of God.” (John 1:12)

THE VISUAL BIBLE – JOHN’S GOSPEL -2003 film

I was told about this film and I was intrigued to see how they would visualise the prologue of John’s Gospel – verses 1-14 of Chapter 1 – which sounds quite abstract at the start.

I was glad of a bible commentary’s helpful overview of the passage, breaking it into sections:

Cosmology, Witness, History and Salvation

Verses 1-5: Cosmology –the big picture, from the beginning of time, and looking forward to the future.

Visual images – sun rising over a rocky shore with the waves of the sea making foam against a rocky shore – quite a mystical image.

Verses 6-8: Witness –

Visual images: John preaching in the countryside, telling people that Jesus would be coming, baptising people.

Verses 9-13: History - Jesus coming to these people, silently walking through the community of people getting on with their everyday lives, apparently unnoticed, not interacting with any of them at this point. He was dwelling among them – God incarnate, present in the midst of human life.

Some received him and believed in him. (v.12)

Stephen Verney writes, “They become children of God not by working hard and climbing up into Heaven, but by letting go and receiving a gift.” (Verney, 1984:217) This is GRACE.

Verses 14-18: Salvation –Jesus came full of grace and truth. He was the means to restore mankind to God; to “reconcile to himself all things” as the Colossians reading puts it.

This is all visualised in the opening scenes of the film.

CHALLENGES AND ENCOURAGEMENTS FOR US TODAY

What makes God visible today?

To what extent does the church make God visible?

What are the challenges? Encouragements? I offer two:

Firstly: Sara Savage and Eolene Boyd-Macmillan – co-authors of ‘The human face of church’.

In this book, they recognise the reality of our humanity in being church, the body of Christ (*1 Cor.12:27 “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it”*).

They offer encouragement that we can be effective despite our human weaknesses.

Look at the disciples – “after the resurrection, empowered, courageous but still leaky vessels.”

Look at us now – “we struggle onward with differing perspectives as we LEAP AND STUMBLE towards God This is not simply the back of the canvas, whose messy imperfections are to be kept from public view. This can be the incarnate face of Jesus ... something greater than the sum of the parts can emerge; the human face of church can reveal the humility of the Face we seek”.

In short, we are encouraged that even with our imperfections, the church can reveal an image of God.

Secondly, at the recent curates’ conference where we were thinking about mission:

Twice in our discussions, the point came up that if we are passionate about something, this is inspiring to others.

In relation to mission, the things that we have a real passion to do can be a sign of our calling. It need not be vague and hard to do mission if we look out for what people are passionate about, our calling.

If all are made in the image of God, then our passion and our gifts are God given, and this is part of the image of God in us – so by being ourselves as God made us, we are making God visible.

Ultimately, why is this important?

I believe it is because God longs for our company; he longs for us to return to him; he longs for creation to be restored to its original beauty (so beautifully described in the Proverbs reading). As Stephen Verney says,

“God’s word expresses his own unique nature, which is Love”. (Verney, 198:215)

Modern technology has increased communication – from letters to the telephone to email with pictures to Skype and Facetime – this improves contact with, and increases VISIBILITY of, our loved ones who may live far away, whom we do not see.

But nothing can beat seeing them face to face.

Likewise, we have hope that one day we will see God face to face.

“Now, we see in a mirror dimly, but then we shall SEE face to face ...” (1 Cor. 13:12)

God, who is made visible in Jesus, whom we imagine from what is written about him, will be fully visible to us and we will live in his company for ever.

This is summed up well in two verses from the last chapter of the last book of the Bible – the Revelation to John, Chapter 22, verses 4 and 5:

“The servants of the Lamb shall see the face of God, whose name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night: they will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for God will be their light, and they will reign for ever and ever”.

Amen.

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