

## **2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday Before Lent – Fr Rob's Leaving Service**

All week I have been trying to think about what to preach on this morning. So many mixed emotions. It is difficult not to feel a sense of loss amidst all the excitement of what we are being called to next. We have done so much together and we have so many treasured memories. But we must remember that this is not the end. What we have achieved these past four years is not a pinnacle of church life, but only the beginning of what church can be in this place. We have barely even scratched the surface. It will be for you all, and the next priest, to continue building as best you can.

I have many conversations with people who are struggling to believe in the love of God in the face of personal or impersonal suffering or loss. Maybe they have come through the experience of watching someone die horribly or tragically, maybe they witness the suffering of people further removed because of starvation, war or inequality in the world. The question always arises; 'why would God let this happen?' Many people look around the world today and see it primarily in terms of absence and loss instead of presence and blessing. They cannot see evidence of a loving and intelligent purpose, only a set of random and meaningless occurrences.

When we despair, the world all too easily begins to look dark and we cannot help but measure existence according to what we have lost or what we do not have. But there is another way to interpret what we see and experience.

There is and always has been a force at work that has been moving all things towards splendour and beauty. That beauty is not to be measured in terms of material gain, but in terms of ongoing change, change that moves us further and further into a peace and order that was present even

before the world began. Under this understanding, everything we have is a blessing.

I wonder, how often do you notice coincidences happening in your daily life? Things which seem beyond explanation and yet appear to reveal a sort of destiny? How often have you found yourself in a difficult situation only for an angel to appear in the guise of a stranger or friend with just the right tools for the moment? How often have you looked back at an event which happened many years earlier and realised how fortunate you are that it happened in the way it did; how much more negative would life have been had it not unfolded in that way? Coincidences are not just some random turn of fortunate events. Coincidences are God's unsuccessful attempt at remaining anonymous. And I wonder how much brighter the world would seem if we took note of them more often and recognised them as moments of divine grace?

In our reading from the Book of Proverbs today, we heard of the wisdom of knowing that there is a loving presence that operates outside of time. Before even the world began it was there and it operates actively to keep all things on track. When things go out of kilter, it intervenes to bring things back to where they need to be.

Desmond Tutu comments that "despite appearances to the contrary, there is evidence everywhere that we do live in a moral universe – that in the end, justice prevails". That is not to say that suffering is meaningless, but that if we look at the world, suffering only has a set time, and over-time things move back into balance. For our own lives, it is a case of having to find and live in that balance as best we can, even when we find ourselves in the most difficult of circumstances. Expressing a sense of positivity that, no matter how bad things may seem, we always have hope and trust that we are moving towards goodness. And each of us has our part to play.

According to all the Gospel narratives, and the ongoing belief of the Church, Jesus comes from God and returns to God. Indeed, in Jesus we see how that may be true for each of us too. But in Jesus' case, this means that he was a part of God in the very beginning, before the world was even created. The love we see in Jesus is present eternally in God the Father. Jesus mirrors the attributes of God, precisely because he is an eternal part of God. In the first chapter of John's Gospel, known as the prologue, John tells us that: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God...All things came into being through Him and without Him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life'. John then tells us that: 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us'. John is talking about Jesus. Jesus didn't just appear in the 1<sup>st</sup> century out of nowhere, he is the eternal Word and that becomes flesh in his person.

In his prologue, John is drawing on the first chapter of Genesis from the Old Testament. The Old Testament is of course written in Hebrew. Interestingly, the Hebrew word for 'beginning' can also mean 'sum-total', 'head of', or 'first-fruits'. The Hebrew word for 'in' can also mean 'through' and 'for'. Our Bible translations do little justice to this diversity of meaning in the original text. But if we apply them, as Paul does in his letter to the Colossians, we find out something quite remarkable about the person of Jesus. Christ is the one 'in', 'through' and 'for' whom creation and redemption are accomplished. He is the 'beginning', the 'sum-total', the 'head' of all things.

Jesus, the Word, is the essence of life. But this Word doesn't end when Christ is killed on the cross. Because Jesus is eternally part of God, his life cannot be extinguished nearly so easily and his resurrection is testimony of the strength of his union with the Father. Once Jesus

ascends into heaven, it is him, the Word, that continues to keep all things in balance, as he sends the Holy Spirit which continues to breathe new life into the world; just as it did in the very beginning. In order to live in justice and truth each of us must try and live in tune with the Spirit's promptings. We must stay in touch with Jesus, precisely because in him is life. Jesus is the means by which all things continue to be ordered in the present. In Jesus we find a way to live life in all its fullness.

Our Gospel reading today from John has us ending at verse 14. If we were to skip forward to verse 16 we would find something even more inspiring regarding the person of Christ. In verse 16 John says; 'from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.' Imagine that, grace upon grace. Grace overflowing grace. So much grace that it rolls like the morning mist and runs over itself like a waterfall; so that all who discover it may receive living water. And that water will refresh life in you for eternity.

As we all move forward into a scary new future, there will be endless moments of grace bestowed upon us. It will be for us to recognise them. We must not dismiss them as coincidences, as though there is no order in the world; as though every event is meaningless; as though life is meaningless. Remember that coincidences are just God's unsuccessful attempt at remaining anonymous – they are God's little gifts to us. How we respond is for us to decide.