

7th February 2021 : Second Sunday before Lent

This morning I would like to focus on the stories of three men, who feature in today's Lectionary readings:

John the Baptist, Jesus the Christ and Paul the Evangelist.

After Jesus the Son of God, John and Paul are two of the most significant people in the New Testament. Their obedience to God led to Christianity being a transforming faith for anyone and everyone in every generation, who chooses to hear it, and to seek and find it for themselves.

The Collect for today captures the fact that we are all made in the image of God and have his DNA. It's what we 'do with it' that counts. Do we choose to look for God in the midst of the life we are living, to provide his meaning?

Let us pray:

Almighty God, you have created the heavens and the earth and made us in your own image: teach us to discern your hand in all your works and your likeness in all your children; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit reigns supreme over all things, now and for ever. Amen.

On Sunday 31st January, I was watching the Songs of Praise Semi-Finalists of the Gospel Singer of the Year Competition. One of the key components the Judges were looking for was integrity; for the words of the songs to be believed by the singers and communicated as believable to those listening. I found all five singers 'moved me' and I was surprised to find that my three were chosen by the Judges to go through to next Sunday's Final.

I may not be a Gospel Singer, so how does my faith come across to others? Is it believable to others, that God is a God of love and truth?

Is this belief in God the Father of all creation communicated as something which permeates my whole being? ...Not because it's pious, and certainly not because it's perfect, but because it's believable. Is there an integrity that comes across? Is it believable that serving God through faith is the most compelling part of my life, to which every doubt and every decision is directed for his guidance?

We come to the readings about these three men.

Firstly, John the Baptist

John 1: 6 – 9; 15 - 18

⁶ There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

⁹ The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. ¹⁰

¹⁵ (John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, “This is the one I spoke about when I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’”) ¹⁶ From the fullness of his grace, we have all one blessing after another. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

John was conceived following the longing of the barren Elizabeth and the disbelief of the ageing Elizabeth and Zechariah. They were entrusted with bearing one child; the one whose whole life would be in obedience to following God’s will and purpose, to prepare the way for Jesus, the Son of God. John’s message to those listening was to repent, to turn to God and confess the sinful ways through which they’d become separated from the holy and almighty God. John implored them to seek God’s ways and his forgiveness.

Who taught John all this? He preceded Jesus, so this resulted from teaching through his upbringing. His parents knew from the outset John’s destiny, as captured in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 1, Zechariah’s song:

**⁷⁶ You, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High;
for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him,
⁷⁷ to give his people the knowledge of salvation
through the forgiveness of their sins,
⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God,
by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven
⁷⁹ to shine on those living in darkness
and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the path of peace.”**

⁸⁰ And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the wilderness until he appeared publicly to Israel.

Everything else John learnt must have been a direct inspiration from God, which continued while he lived in the wilderness in preparation for his Ministry. His obedience was of paramount importance to the Story, to the Story of Christian faith.

Secondly Jesus Christ

John 1: 1 – 5, 10 - 14

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹ He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹² Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

We know that at the age of 12 years, Jesus was already both learning and teaching in the synagogue, where he felt perfectly at home. Luke chapter 2 records how at the Feast of the Passover, Jesus was left behind and his parents, Mary and Joseph, had to retrace their steps to find him:

“they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers”.

Jesus was brought up as a faithful Jew, but in obedience to the call God had on his life, he had to open his heart to a pioneering message of grace for all people. He would be the conduit, after his time of preparation for his ministry.

Thirdly, the Apostle and Evangelist, Paul, writing to the people of Colossae

Colossians 1: 15 - 20

¹⁵ The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. ¹⁹ For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

We recall that the Apostle Paul was born 'Saul'. When Paul arrived in Jerusalem, the whole city turned into uproar, because of his reputation of violence towards those who followed Jesus Christ. The people were called to silence and, then, as recorded in Acts chapter 22...

Paul said: ³ "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors. I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. ⁴ I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, ⁵ as the high priest and all the Council can themselves testify. I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished.

⁶ "About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. ⁷ I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, 'Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?'

⁸ "'Who are you, Lord?' I asked.

" 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,' he replied. ⁹ My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me.

¹⁰ "'What shall I do, Lord?' I asked.

“ ‘Get up,’ the Lord said, ‘and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.’ ¹¹ My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me.

¹² “A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. ¹³ He stood beside me and said, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight!’ And at that very moment I was able to see him.

¹⁴ “Then he said: ‘The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. ¹⁵ You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard. ¹⁶ And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.

Paul may have been a learned man, but his transformed understanding of Jesus Christ resulted from his conversion, from the complete opposite set of life-defining beliefs. This drove him far and wide to proclaim to both Jews and Gentiles about the love and the life-giving Spirit of God; that is what he knew to be absolute Truth, through the evidence in his own life.

First and foremost however, Paul needed to obey the call to “Get up and go”.

Not one of these three, John, Jesus or Paul, had an easy life. They moved amongst those who seriously harmed and often deliberately misunderstood them. Leaders of the day even misled others about them. Each of these three was finally killed for their faith. So, what could possibly be behind their commitment to a life of obedience? None other than the supreme and compelling love of God, which drew them close to God; which committed them both to tell and to show others that they, too, could receive this saving and life-giving love.

I ask this question again:

Is it believable that serving God through faith is the most compelling part of my life, to which every doubt and every decision is directed for his guidance?

Is this true of you, too?.....

PAUSE

This hymn takes me back to my first years of understanding what Christian faith meant to me, in the early 1970's. The refrain follows each verse. Perhaps you remember it too and will sing it or say the words to yourself.

1. I know not why God's wondrous grace
To me He hath made known,
Nor why, unworthy, Christ in love
Redeemed me for His own.
 - *Refrain:*
But "I know Whom I have believed,
And am persuaded that He is able,
To keep that which I've committed
Unto Him against that day."
2. I know not how this saving faith
To me He did impart,
Nor how believing in His Word
Wrought peace within my heart.
3. I know not how the Spirit moves,
Convincing men of sin,
Revealing Jesus through the Word,
Creating faith in Him.
4. I know not what of good or ill
May be reserved for me,
Of weary ways or golden days,
Before His face I see.
5. I know not when my Lord may come,
At night or noontide fair,
Nor if I walk the vale with Him,
Or meet Him in the air.

[Daniel W. Whittle](#), pub. 1883

Let us pray:

Gracious and righteous God, we praise you that you are always active – moving throughout history, working in our individual lives, striving to work out your purposes.

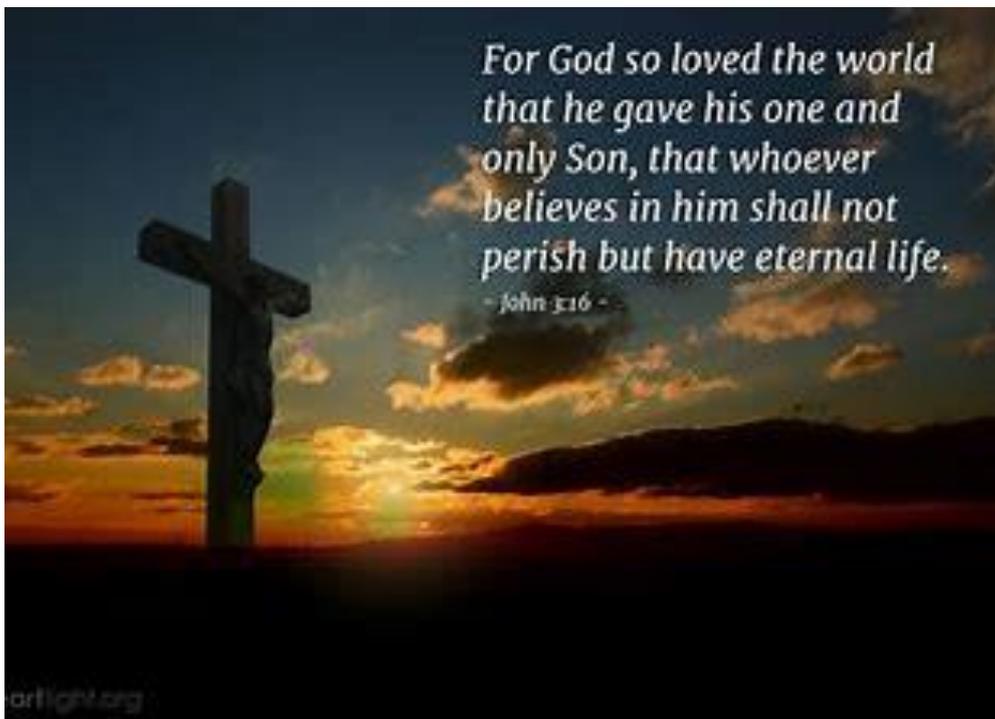
You are not remote or detached from our world, holding yourself aloof from our human condition, unconcerned about our daily affairs, but intimately involved in every aspect of our experience.



PAUSE

Response: Gracious and righteous God, we rejoice in your eternal and individual purposes.

We praise you for your immeasurable love, always watching over us, constantly reaching out to bless, daily by our sides. You are a God full of mercy, always ready to forgive, always prepared to give us the benefit of the doubt, always eager to wipe the slate clean and start again.



PAUSE

Response: Gracious and righteous God, we rejoice at your amazing grace.

Please forgive us that because of your generous love, we can sometimes become over-familiar with you – losing sight of your holiness, forgetting your commandments, becoming careless in our discipleship.

Please forgive us that we can lose our sense of wonder – no longer open to all you can do amongst us, no longer expecting the unexpected, no longer a people with the courage to dream dreams.



PAUSE

Response: Gracious and righteous God, we rejoice in the forgiveness you offer.

Please, Lord God, help us to realise our faults and to confess them honestly to you; to discover the joy that comes from being at one and at peace with you. Inspire us with obedience to behave and to believe and to speak of you. May we look forward to that day, when your will shall be done and your kingdom shall finally come on earth, as it is in heaven.



PAUSE

Response: Gracious and righteous God, we rejoice in the certainty of your final triumph, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Song (the refrain follows each verse)

There is a redeemer,
Jesus, God's own Son,
Precious Lamb of God, Messiah,
Ho, oh , oh-oh , holy One.

*Thank you, oh my Father,
for giving us Your Son
and leaving Your Spirit,
'til the work on Earth is done.*

Jesus my redeemer,
Name above all names,
precious Lamb of God, Messiah,
Oh-h, for-or sinners slain.

When I stand in Glory,
I will see His face
and there I'll serve my King forever,
i-in tha-at Holy Place.

The Creed

I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,

the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

Let us pray:

That the people of God in all the world may worship in spirit and in truth,
borne from belief, hope and trust in the living God

Response: Let us pray to the Lord

That the leaders of the world may seek after the ways of peace, borne out of
love and compassion for all humanity

Response: Let us pray to the Lord

That people may respect their place in the wellbeing of the whole creation and
work together for its recovery

Response: Let us pray to the Lord

That all who suffer at this time may know the living presence of the God who
brings his wholeness into healing

Response: Let us pray to the Lord

That all who with Christ have entered the shadow of death, may rest in peace
and rise in glory

Response: Let us pray to the Lord

Silence for our own prayers

The Lord's Prayer

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be Thy Name.**

**Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.**

**Give us this day our daily bread
and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those, who trespass against us
and deliver us from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom,
the power and the glory
for ever and ever. Amen.**

NOTICES!

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us all evermore.

Amen.

Let us bless the Lord.

Response: Thanks be to God.