

SERMON FROM COVENTRY CATHEDRAL

PREACHER John Witcombe, Dean of Coventry
DATE 16 March 2014
EVENT Parish Eucharist, All Saints' Leamington Priors
BIBLE READINGS Gen 12.1-4a; Roms 4.1-5, 13-17; John 3.1-17
THEME Discipleship: Seeing the Kingdom

It's very good to be here – thank you for the invitation. It's tempting to say that I don't get out much, but, happily, that wouldn't be true: I am making it my practice to be around and about in the diocese at least one Sunday every month, and I'm very happy that this month sees me here (and next week in Warwick, as it happens....)

I'm also delighted to be revisiting old friends, Charlotte and Robson. I don't know if you've heard the story about how they came to be in the cathedral – and thence to All Saints? I was visiting the Graduation exhibition for the University of Arts London, at their Wimbledon campus, last summer when my daughter was showing the dresses and coats she had made for her course in Costume Interpretation. The exhibition was magnificent, as you might imagine - room after room full of the most extraordinary pieces of creativity, of people seeing things in new ways, and turning what they could see in their minds' eyes into physical objects – dresses, set designs, pieces of fine art, and sculpture. She took me to see a piece which she knew I would like – and so I found myself standing in front of Charlotte and Robson, and just gazing. After some time, I asked where it would be going after the show, and a man standing next to me said, “anywhere where they have got the money to pay for it”. That turned out to be the artist's father, and it led to a conversation which went, at least initially, along the lines of, “well I don't have any money, but I have a cathedral, and I could really see your piece there, if you would like to explore that.”

It was, in the end, all about seeing. The exhibition was full of the evidence of what the students had been able to see. This sculpture arose from what Ginie Morris found herself seeing as she travelled through London: and the sculpture communicates what she saw. I wonder what you see when you look at it, when you gaze at it and spend time with it? Ginie saw the reality of life on the streets, the bleak and cold reality, but tinged with beauty: there is something of the Pieta in the sculpture. It's made of transient materials – one reason why I thought we should perhaps not keep it for longer than 6 months – plaster of paris, and the facial features moulded in wax. Someone suggested we should have it cast in bronze and placed in the ruins – what do you think?

I think, in the end, I saw beauty, pathos, meaning, challenge. I saw, in truth, Christ.

You are in a series on discipleship, through the weeks of Lent. Discipleship, as I'm sure you know, begins with the gift of seeing. Jesus first words to the first disciples, after the question “what are you looking for”, were these: “*Come and See*”. Discipleship begins when Jesus says ‘Come’ – ministry begins when he says, ‘Go’ – I used to teach that to my curates and clergy in Gloucester. Come and Go – the rhythm of Christian life and work. We cannot be disciples unless we *follow*, we cannot *follow* unless we can *see*. The sculpture which you have helps you to see – as does all good art. I recently visited the Paul Klee exhibition in London – he paints beautiful and optimistic pictures, usually abstract, but full of meaning. The exhibition was called, *Making Visible*, from Klee's statement: “Art does not reproduce the visible; it makes visible.” Or this, “Art does not reproduce what we see. It makes us see.” (That is the task of the church, to make visible what God has done – so that we can

join his story, his painting of what the worlds can be as he wants to draw it, with him as the artist rather than us.)

Today's gospel describes someone who is having some trouble seeing. But he has caught a glimmer of something which he wants to explore. Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night – a lovely metaphor for his struggle to see clearly, which John sows in the opening lines of the account. He describes what he has seen so far – that Jesus is a Godly teacher, thus taking control of the conversation. Jesus responds by upping the ante, as it were: no one can see the Kingdom of God – the world as God would have it to be – unless they have been given divine assistance. (Fancy glasses, you could almost say, like the urim and thummim from the story of the book of Mormon.) A friend pointed out to me this week that Verse 3 is translated in a variety of ways in different translations: born from above, born afresh, born anew. Which speaks to you? What do you need, in order to catch sight of what God is up to, and work out how to play your part – just as Nicodemus, we hope, was seeking to do?

He's struggling – he reminds me of that cartoon of the aged poodle balancing on a high wire whilst juggling three tennis balls with his nose. The text says, 'Fido couldn't quite get over the feeling that he was an old dog and this was a new trick'. It's hard when you have given your life to something, to have the road clearly mapped out in front of you, to be expected to see round a corner, to turn aside and discover a whole new route. So Jesus helps him understand – and we might want to make use of the interchangeability of wind and Spirit in these next verses. The same Greek word, *pneuma* – is used for both – so Nicodemus may have heard Jesus say, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and wind: water and wind for repentance and refreshing – the power of God behind our human actions. The catching of the divine wind, which then propels us headlong into the Kingdom. You can't see the Kingdom without being born from above; you can't enter the Kingdom without being blown into it by the divine wind which blows from heaven. To be a disciple, you need to see, and you need to feel, and you need to turn like a sail to catch the wind.

Nicodemus is still struggling (as perhaps are you!) Jesus says, you understand the law – but you don't understand this? The problem for Nicodemus, as for so many Christians, is that he thinks that religion is something done by people to God. Or for him. The truth is the opposite. Religion is something done by God to people – or for them, if they will accept it. The Spirit, about whom Jesus is speaking, has been active throughout the years of the covenant and before it, forming a people for Godself. The story of what Christians call the Old Testament is, in truth, the story of the Spirit letting God's people know how wants them to live, and giving them the power to do it: the Spirit both breathes life and directs that life. – the Spirit opens our eyes and propels us towards what we see. The Spirit helps God's people see what God is doing, and what he wants – and then gives them power beyond themselves to fulfil the command.

That's what the Spirit has always done: revealing God's presence and purpose, and drawing people into the Kingdom where that purpose is realised. It can be tempting in these days of Lent to think that the story is all about Jesus – that the days of the Spirit are still around the corner. Nothing could be farther from the truth. It is the Spirit, making a new people for God, who anoints Jesus as Messiah and hand in hand with him opens the Kingdom of Heaven to all who see, and turn, and allow themselves to be blown into it.

Seeing, and believing, and following. These are the duties of disciples. Yesterday afternoon I went to stand for a few minutes at the entrance to the ruins of the old cathedral, just outside my house in Coventry. That is a place for seeing. A place to see others – the girl in Goth makeup and a

flowing black dress having her photograph taken in one of the old guild chapels. The family wandering in looking for tourist information. The American tourists walking out into the middle and just standing. The children, playing on the broken pillars and steps leading up to where the pulpit would have been.

A place to see God making himself known in charred wood and fallen nails, in the midst of disaster and destruction – but issuing in the bold hope of the new cathedral with its soaring windows and challenging, captivating tapestry of Christ enthroned in glory surrounded by the symbols of his creation.

The church – like the cathedral - is there to help the world see. So that seeing, they may believe. And believing, they may know themselves part of the Kingdom of God.

What do you see – do you need to see – in Christ this Lent?
And coming to him, what do you see, with his eyes, in the world – and how do you respond?