

SERMON 3'1'16 (*Ephesians 1: 3-14; John 1: [1-9] 10-18*)

(Michael Fluck, Reader, St. Faith's)

May I speak in the name of the one true God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen †

Part 1:

So that's it, today's the 2nd Sunday of Christmas. The visitors have gone. We'll soon be taking down decorations (if we haven't already).

Christmas is a wonderful period of celebration, when we remember the birth of that baby in Bethlehem. It's a time too of *togetherness* with family and friends, a time of *joy*. Well, for *many* people – but it *can* also be a time of *sadness* – for those of us who have lost a loved one, those *separated* from their families (for whatever reason), those with *no* family, those with *no home*.

But in that *baby*, who had to sleep in an *animals'* feeding trough, we find almighty *God* himself, the *Creator* of everything, choosing to share our humanity – with all its *pain* as well as its joys. And today's *readings* from John's Gospel and Paul's letter to the Ephesians both address the *significance* of that event.

Like many people, my family and I enjoy a good walk over Christmas (regardless of the weather), to blow away the cobwebs. This year, we walked along the beach at West Wittering and round into Chichester Harbour. It was wonderful (despite the wind) – that huge sky, those vast expanses of sand, the sea, the nearness of the waves. And

something else – the unusual views of familiar places (the loW, Hayling Island, Southsea, Emsworth, even Portsdown Hill), all seen from a new angle which suddenly gives you an *overview* of where they stand in relation to each other.

The start of John's gospel and of Paul's letter are a bit like that. Before getting into the details, they aim to give us an *overview* of the *significance* of that baby – in fact a bird's eye view of the essential features of the Christian faith.

(Since Tom has already preached on the opening of John's Gospel at least twice this Christmas period, I shall focus on Paul's letter).

Part 2:

Paul's letters are the earliest Christian writings - around 30 years after Jesus' crucifixion, when many people who'd known Jesus were still alive.

Paul had been a devout Jew, a highly educated Pharisee, thoroughly familiar with the scriptures (our Old Testament). He believed that God wanted a *loving relationship* with humankind and so had established a *covenant* with his 'chosen people', through Abraham and later Moses.

Paul had believed that the key to *salvation* (being *accepted* by God in love and forgiveness), was to meticulously *obey* the *Law* – the Commandments given to Moses by God. And he had been a zealous *persecutor* of Christians, on behalf of the authorities, considering them

followers of a *false* 'messiah' who had deservedly died a shameful death for blasphemy.

Then all that suddenly *changed* when, on his way to arrest Christians in Damascus, Paul had a dramatic encounter with the *risen* Jesus. This left him in no doubt that: Jesus really had *risen* and is alive; he truly is God's promised *Messiah*; he *is* the Son of *God*; and God can only really be *known* through *Jesus*.

It's a beautiful irony that, during Paul's encounter, the risen Christ explicitly directed him to spread the 'gospel' (the 'good news') among the *Gentiles* – the very people Paul had considered to be *outside* God's special concern! And, having made contact with Jesus' astonished disciples, that's what he did.

Surprisingly though, unlike the Gospels, *Paul's* writings say little about Jesus' *life* or his *teaching*. That may be because so many eye-witnesses (like Peter and John) were still around, so the *facts* had spread by word of mouth. Instead, Paul's concern (as reflected in today's reading) was to establish the *significance* of Jesus in relation to *God's purposes* as revealed in the OT.

Part 3:

Christmas is a time for *presents*, and the *core* of Paul's message concerns the *ultimate* Christmas present – a gift bestowed on us by *God*, not because we've *earned* it, but: (a) because of God's *love* for

humankind; (b) because of God's ultimate *plan* for the *whole* of creation, and because of the part *we're* called to *play* in that. This *free gift* is given to us *in Jesus*.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians tells us that God's purpose and pleasure is to *adopt us* as his *own children* – and that we *become* his when we *hear the 'Good News'* and *believe in Christ*.

What exactly *is* this '*Good News*'?

Each Sunday, in this service, we say Prayers of Penitence in which we *admit* to God that we have *sinned* – against *God* and against other *people* – in things that we've *done*, in things we've *failed* to do, in things we've *said*, or even in things that we've *thought*.

In the original words of the Book of Common Prayer, '*we've offended against God's holy laws* (i.e. the 10 Commandments) – and *there is no health in us*'.

Take a moment to think about it – anger, envy, failure to love God with all our hearts, failure to care about other people as much as ourselves (even that driver who's just pushed into the traffic queue in front of us) – the list soon mounts up. And we often don't stop to think about it. At this point, I'm reminded about the father who angrily complained to the teacher that someone had stolen his child's pencils – "it's the principle, it's not the *pencils* – I can get plenty of those from *work!*"

Oh dear! It really does seem that there is ‘no health in us’ - we just can’t manage it, however well-*intentioned* we may be.

Sin (that unfashionable word!) is alive and well, and seems always destined to drive a wedge between us and God.

Part 4:

However, as Paul emphasises, the Good News is that God *understands* this - and, provided we *acknowledge* our failures and genuinely try to *turn away* from old habits of thought and action, we can somehow be set *free* through *Jesus’s death*. We can become *blameless* before God, restored to a loving relationship – ‘redeemed’ like a hostage for whom a ransom is paid.

BUT *how* does all this *work*, we might wonder?

Words like ‘*sacrifice*’ and ‘*redemption*’ – might suggest that Jesus’s suffering and death were a penalty to appease an angry, vengeful God. But that would be a serious *misunderstanding*.

As a devout *Jew*, Paul is steeped in the OT. So he talks in terms of OT *imagery*, which can seem incomprehensible to modern ears.

The central *theme* in Paul’s letters concerns the *removal* of the *defilement of sin* (and its consequences) - firstly, from *individual* believers, like you and me, and *ultimately* from the whole *universe*.

It’s clear that *Paul* understands *Jesus’s death* in terms of the ancient Jewish cult of *atonement sacrifices* (as described in Leviticus). If someone

broke God's commandments, their sin could be ritually transferred onto an unblemished animal (like a lamb), which was then sacrificed.

OT sacrifices are *not* about *placating God*, but about dealing with *sin*. Since the person's sin is *wiped out*, God is provided with a justification for withholding punishment without breaking the covenant agreement established with his people under Moses. In that way, the repentant *sinner* was enabled to *remain* in a *covenant relationship* with God, rather than having to become an *outcast*.

In our case, it's *God* himself who takes the *initiative* by *providing* the sacrifice – not a *lamb* but his own beloved *Son*, who *chose* to *share* our *humanity*.

Paul tells us that the *death of Jesus* must be understood against the *background* of God's *covenant* with the human race. This covenant involves a loving obligation on both sides (as in a marriage), as reflected in the use of the Hebrew word '*hesed*' - it's not just a *legalistic* contract.

As the ancient Israelites came to recognise, the mystery we call God is a *personal* force which actively *seeks* a *personal relationship* with human beings rooted in *love*. Just as God *initiated* a *covenant* with Abraham & Sarah and their descendants, so Jesus' death and resurrection can be understood as our loving God establishing a new *covenant* with everyone (Jew or Gentile) who chooses to *accept* his *invitation*.

All of us *repeatedly fail* to live according to God's standards. We're *weak* creatures of flesh and blood. BUT by being truly *sorry*, really *striving* to do *better*, and following *Jesus*, we can be set *free* - our sins wiped out, and our relationship with God restored. (It really is an amazing thought – the slate wiped clean).

As Paul makes clear, though, that's just part of a much *larger* picture. God's ultimate purpose is to *bring the whole* of creation together, making *all things new*, with Christ as its head. And as a guarantee (a 'pledge') of what is to come, God offers us his *Holy Spirit* to *support* and *guide* us - if only we'll place our trust in him.

As his letters *emphasise*, Paul realised that the life, death, and (above all) the *resurrection* of Jesus is the turning point in the history of the whole universe.

The remaking of *creation* has actually *begun*. And followers of Jesus – that includes *you* and *me* - are *called* by him to play a part (however modest), by making a difference through our own lives, and giving the world a glimpse of what God's promised *new creation* will be *like*.

Use us, Lord.

Amen. †