La Côte Anglican Church

Fifth Sunday in Lent – Sermon from Clare Amos

17 March 2024 – Holy Communion in Gingins

Two weeks ago I was reflecting with you on the ambiguities of temples, or specifically the temple in Jerusalem: how its very beauty, its very cherishing, could become a snare – leading it to be a place of control and exclusion, rather than of welcome. That reality was visibly symbolised by those warning inscriptions which forbade Gentiles to approach too closely." Let no foreigner enter …. Anyone caught [violating] will be held accountable for his ensuing death"

Now I have to admit that I have never seen any comparable warning signs around, but in some ways, for Anglican Christians, Canterbury Cathedral, might be said to be a sort of equivalent of the Temple. During the 25 or so years that Alan and I lived in Kent, for some of those years in Canterbury itself, we had quite a lot to do with the Cathedral. It hadn't always been the happiest of places, but Robert Willis, who became Dean in 2001, and spent 20 years in the role, did a great deal to make it far more welcoming and hospitable.

I got to know Dean Robert quite well when I worked at the Anglican Communion Office, and I remember him telling me about how, shortly after he had arrived, he and his colleagues had been trying to develop a 'mission statement' for the Cathedral. It was the period when mission statements had become suddenly popular and every self respecting institution had to have one. It was proving quite difficult to agree on a text: everyone around wanted their pet concern to be included and it was getting longer and longer.

But then one day Robert had been at morning worship in the cathedral and the New Testament reading had been the one that we have just listened to from John's Gospel in which a group of Gentiles had been visiting Jerusalem and had approached Philip, Jesus' disciple, with the request, 'We wish to see Jesus'. And a light-bulb went on in Robert' mind and he had found his mission statement, which was, in effect, simply a response to that request to see Jesus. So the cathedral's mission statement became simply 'To show people Jesus'. As the cathedral's website puts it, it has acted since 'as a guide to our prayer life and a benchmark for our actions.'

Perhaps in a similar vein it is a tradition in some churches, particularly in the United States, to have the words 'Sir we would see Jesus' displayed prominently in the pulpit as a reminder to the preacher of the task that was being set before him – or her.

But what does it mean to show people Jesus? And did those people labelled as 'Greeks' in today's reading,- probably intended to represent the wider Gentile world - have their desire fulfilled and get to see him? The biblical text seems to leave it ambiguously open, perhaps deliberately. It is not clearly stated whether or not they did.

It is however certainly true is that this request becomes quite literally the crux moment of Jesus' ministry as described in the Gospel of John, swivelling Jesus, and us, towards his passion and his death.

Jesus' answer to their request is that the hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. A few verses later he adds, 'And I when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself' – potentially of course answering their hopes and longings to be present with him.

One of the gifts offered to us by the Gospel of John is this Gospel's use of language, which is both paradoxical and elusive, and which, for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, encapsulates the profound mystery of God's dealing with humanity. Particular words and phrases are repeated at key moments throughout the Gospel, each time they appear tip-toeing us closer into the heart of the story.

There are two such examples in our reading for today.

The first is glory. 'The hour is come for the Son of Man to be glorified'. Glory is quite literally a glorious word. If you dig into the Old Testament, and explore the meaning of the Hebrew word for glory, it comes from a verbal root meaning 'heavy' – and thus referred to what gave someone 'weight' or 'visible presence'. When one spoke of God's glory one was thinking about the ways in which God was visibly present with human beings: characteristically in the Old Testament glory is associated with the attributes of power, with manifestations of thunder, majesty and dominion. The Gospel of John draws on the essential link between glory and God's visible presence and yet also radically subverts it; for beginning with the first mention of 'glory' in John's Prologue, 'The word became flesh and we have seen his glory', glory re-echoes through the experiences of Jesus' ministry eventually opening our eyes to discover with amazement that the moment when God's glory can most truly be seen, when God is most visibly present in Jesus, will be that point in time when the power of God can be seen in the ultimate weakness of the cross. It is no accident that Jesus' comment in this passage about being glorified is immediately followed by the remark about a grain of wheat falling into the earth and dying.

Such a paradoxical inversion of the understanding of the nature of 'glory', and its identification with apparent weakness lies at the heart of our Christian faith: though in all honesty in many periods of Christian history the Christian church has found the paradox too challenging to bear.

The second example, a delicious instance of the Gospel's genius for ironic double entendre, appeared towards the end of our reading, 'I, when I am lifted up from the earth will draw all people to myself.' Perhaps you remember that we heard that phrase 'lifted up' last Sunday, as Alan was exploring with us an earlier passage about the serpent being 'lifted up in the wilderness', alongside the pledge that the Son of Man will be 'lifted up' so that whoever believes in him will have eternal life. In both instances the phrase 'lifted up' is intended to be seen in two complementary ways. It refers to the physical lifting up of Jesus on the cross at the time of crucifixion – which is so shortly to take place. But the Greek word can also refer to a metaphorical 'lifting up' or 'exalting' such as one would do as a mark of respect to a ruler or king. In this double use, once again John's Gospel is taking us to the heart of our Christian paradox which tells us of a king who reigns from a cross, that most unlikely of thrones.

Yet there is something else that is also important about this 'lifting up' and why it is necessary. The clue to this has been laid before us in the first chapter of the Gospel,

which ended with a promise to Jesus' first disciples that they would see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. For in Jesus being lifted up on the cross he becomes the bridge between earth and heaven, he fulfils his vocation to be in his own person the meeting place between God and humanity. 'I am the great bridge builder' said Aslan to the children in one of the stories of Narnia, and that is exactly the role of Jesus 'lifted up' on the Cross.

That is brilliantly portrayed in the picture now on the screen, which is a reproduction of a Lenten hungercloth created by Jacques Cherry, an artist from Haiti. A Haitian Jesus hangs on the cross, which is clearly intended to suggest the Tree of Life. But this tree also creates a bridge, a connecting point between the world below, marked out by evil, oppression, and warfare, and the paradisical world above in which peace, justice, and generosity reign. Linking the currently disparate realms of earth and heaven is Jesus himself, stretched out on the tree. Blood from his wounds waters the roots, causing new seeds to sprout.

It is the tree, and the figure who hangs on it, that draws all people, all things, to himself, and opens for them the gateway into heaven.

I think in depicting Jesus's cross as being the tree of life Jacques Cherry caught something significant. Although the Gospel of John nowhere explicitly makes the

connection, there are hints and allusions to the early chapters of Genesis running throughout this Gospel which I think justify us in seeing such a link with those trees of Genesis, the tree of life and of wisdom.

Certainly from the early centuries to the present day the instinct of Christian poets and songwriters has made this association. A modern hymn:

The cross points us to God
Its purpose clear;
The one who gave us life
Still holds us dear.

His arms reach out to grasp
All humankind;
He welcomes all who come
To seek and find.

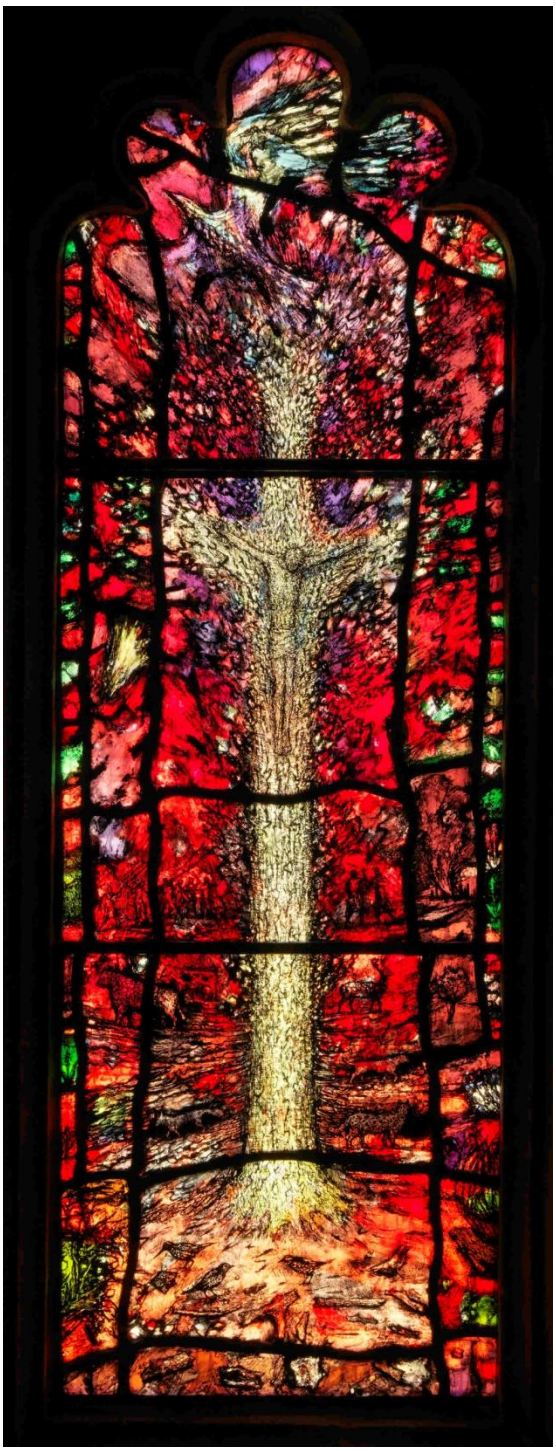
The violence of the years
Is shaped in wood,
Yet here a healing tree
Turns all to good.

The cross stands empty now
An end to strife;
We praise the Lord who plants
The tree of life.

In a few minutes we will sing as our offertory hymn ‘There in God’s garden stands the tree of wisdom’ a glorious song translated here in Geneva from a Hungarian original and which was published in the first World Council of Churches hymnbook Cantate Domino. I think by the time we have finished singing it you won’t forget the connection between Jesus’ cross, the Garden and the tree of life. I am grateful to Richard, our musician for this week, for helping us to do so.

There is one other picture and thought that I want to share with you.

The writings of the 17th century English priest and mystic Thomas Traherne were lost for several centuries. By some fortunate coincidences, beginning in the late 19th century they began to be rediscovered – some of them in fact in the library of Lambeth Palace less than 20 years ago.



Traherne was from Hereford, and in his honour a few years ago Hereford Cathedral commissioned Tom Denny, probably the most creative living British stained glass artist to create four windows each of which acts as a commentary on some thoughts of Traherne. So I share with you these words of Traherne, and the window created to illustrate them.

The Cross of Christ is the Jacob's ladder by which we ascend into the highest heavens. There we see joyful Patriarchs, expecting Saints, Prophets ministering Apostles publishing, and Doctors teaching, all Nations concentering, and Angels praising. That Cross is a tree set on fire with invisible flame, that Illuminateth all the world. The flame is Love:

That Cross is a tree set on fire with invisible flame. The flame is Love.

Those who asked Philip to help them see Jesus were received their answer in the form of a crucified and life-giving Saviour. Intriguingly those Greeks, people who had been prohibited from getting too near God in the Temple building, were now invited to find God in a figure who drew all people to himself. Was that what they were expecting to discover?

And we, if we in our turn were to make the request today ‘Sir, we would see Jesus,’ what is the response we would hope to receive?