

Epiphany 2: Renewed in Christ

Almighty God,
in Christ you make all things new:
transform the poverty of our nature by the riches of your grace,
and in the renewal of our lives
make known your heavenly glory;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. Amen.

As we begin a new year, it's a good time to be reminded in our collect that, "in Christ" God "makes all things new"!! In fact it's very good news. It is a profoundly encouraging thought that, potentially, there is a new improved version of you and me, the world and everything just round the corner. It's in tune also with our ambitious, or perhaps not so ambitious, new year resolutions. Our tradition of making resolutions and attempting to turn over a new leaf is a good one. One of the downsides, however, is that if it all comes down to a self-interested commitment to self-improvement, are we really talking about renewal or something much less liberating? The self-improvement industry, that has recommendations for everything from how to build self-esteem to how to lose weight, get rich, meet love and so on, is apparently worth more than 10 billion dollars a year in the USA! And I expect it's not worth much less here. The drive for a certain kind of self worth is clearly appealing to many. But I do wonder what the self-improvement industry can offer other than successive occasions of a rather temporary sense of elevated self-worth, when all the ducks occasionally line up in sequence?

In connection with this, our faith has some interesting perspectives to offer which, I hope we would agree, run a lot deeper and contain genuine liberative potential. In the collect, following the announcement that in Christ all things are made new, it goes on to pray specifically, "transform the poverty of our nature by the riches of your grace". And contained here is a world of dynamic Christian spirituality all in one phrase! And three things stand out, the potential for transformation, the riches of grace and the poverty

of our nature. In the case of the poverty of our nature, the self-improvement gurus might well be quick to point out that surely herein lies the seed for a profoundly unhelpful and negative self image? If our self understanding is based around the poverty of our nature, this could be emotionally quite damaging. How often do we say of ‘good-enough’ parenting for example that reacting to bad behaviour in a child should not be about condemning the child as bad, but identifying the behaviour as unhelpful or hurtful or selfish. The trouble is, of course, that because we get this wrong, and tend almost inevitably to blame the individual, over time we somehow come to think or feel that we are indeed bad as people, so we really don’t need any extra reminding! Therefore the notion of the ‘poverty of our nature’ may need some interpretation if it is not going to come around and reinforce negative self-perceptions. And, perhaps ironically, our champion here is St Paul; because it was he who came up with the recognition that in Christ we are become a new creation, the old order passes away and a new one takes over. Paul saw that we lived under bondage to sin – not individual sins, but sin as a condition or a dispensation, something that can cling to us. And he connected this with the fallenness of humanity, saying that “as in Adam we all die” – i.e. we are all subject to the influence of sin as a power – and so we are profoundly capable of ‘falling’ (note the same word and concept!) into selfishness, greed, bitterness, vengefulness and so forth. And yet his full observation is that, “as in Adam all die, *even so in Christ shall all be made alive.*” It is through the greater power of Christ in our lives that we are no longer enslaved to sin in the same way, but are living now in a new domain, which is the life of the Spirit. The contrast for Paul was between flesh and spirit and being ‘in the flesh’ was just his metaphor for being enslaved to sin. On the other hand, in the Spirit we are of course the new creation!.... Therefore, when we are reminded of the poverty of our nature, we are reminded at exactly the same time that this nature has been set free through the love of God in Christ to become its true self, something new and renewed and always

renewable. It's like having the Swansea lagoon, that we have heard about this week, producing renewable energy for the whole of the UK with every ebb and flow of the tide! Perhaps one day!... The beauty of life in Christ is that ceaselessly we are renewed.

Which brings us to the matters of grace and transformation.... In the opening verses of the letter to the Corinthians, Paul sets out how grace has transformed these believers; ⁴“I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind... ⁷so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift!” Things are clearly going well. This is only because, of course, as Paul points out two verses earlier, “they are sanctified in Christ Jesus”, and they are “called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ”. The gift of transformation through grace rests upon the humility entailed in doing one very simple thing, namely *calling on the name of the Lord*, softly, gently, persistently. This is what we are invited to do in order to receive the gifts of grace. And we know this too from Romans 10 v.13, that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved”....

Just in case this looks all too good to be true, we should remember that these same believers who have been so praised by Paul soon come in for some sharp criticism. Over abuses at the Lord's supper he says, “now in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse.” He also says, “I hear there are divisions among you”; and in chapter three he says, “even now you are still not ready” (this is for solid, spiritual food) “for you are still of the flesh... for as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not of the flesh?” – here again we meet the flesh metaphor implying bondage to sin.... What we learn, then, is that notwithstanding the gifts of grace and transformation on offer, base humanity gets entangled in the mix! –

which is perhaps quite a relief, given what we know of our own struggles! It may also be why we come back to make confession together, and receive the sacrament together, week after week; because being transformed by grace is often just too much to handle!

This brings us to a final thought, which is that 'being called', as Paul puts it, is something of a responsibility as well as being pure blessing and entailing the promise of transformation. And this comes out in our first reading from one of the servant songs of Isaiah in chapter 49. Rather as in Corinthians 1, the servant people are praised by the writer for the worthiness of their calling. The servant acknowledges that, "the Lord called me before I was born... and he said to me, 'you are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified'". The servant is both cautious and quietly confident about this, reflecting perhaps a natural human reticence or ambivalence in the face of vocation and responsibility, saying; "but I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God." What comes next, however, takes us to the heart of the calling to which the servant must rise. And it is to be told that "it is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel". No, the Lord wants more! The Lord says, "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation shall reach to the ends of the earth!".... And this puts us in mind of our Epiphany calling, that as Christians, we are sent to go and make disciples of all nations, because Christ was to be 'a light to lighten the Gentiles'. In this calling we can, I think, learn a lot from the associated call in Isaiah to be a light to the nations. And recently I heard a very arresting interpretation of this text from an orthodox rabbi. It was at a day conference I attended in December at Lambeth Palace with the Archbishop and the Chief Rabbi. It was for a group of Anglican clergy and orthodox rabbis. And in one of the sessions we were talking about sharing of faith, mostly because the Chief Rabbi has initiated a revival within orthodoxy, calling for orthodox Jewish people to start or restart

keeping shabat. The initiative which began in 2016 is called 'Shabbat UK'. And one of the rabbis in our conversation quoted this text from Isaiah, to say that Jews saw themselves as invited to be a light to the nations; and he put it that this is like being a lamp on a stand or in a room. It's not about being an arc light on a film set, a floodlight at a football match or a lighthouse reaching miles out to sea, but a humble lamp on a table; and that the role of Jews towards others is not to compel them to come to the light, but rather that their light may so shine that people may be drawn to its warmth and glow. And that struck me as a fine example of what it is to carry the light of God in the world, to respond to the calling to be a light to the nations. I think it informs very beautifully our calling as Christians to reflect the light of Christ, as the one given to enlighten the Gentiles.

1705 Words

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