

“Retrospective insight”

Rev Gregor Henderson, Wesley Uniting Church, Canberra

1 April 2012

Psalm 118:19-29, Philippians 2:5-13, John 12:12-16

Last week from John’s gospel we read of Jesus’ rather perplexing response to the Greeks who came to see him. Among other things we learnt that Jesus regarded his coming death by crucifixion as his glorification, and that true glory, in God’s eyes, involves willingness to give of oneself in service, as Jesus did.

Today we celebrate Palm Sunday, which according to John’s gospel, immediately precedes the visit of the curious Greeks. And here we learn a bit more about glorification and the way of Jesus. After briefly recounting Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday, with the crowd calling out verses from the Hebrew Scriptures, John writes “His disciples did not understand these things at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written of him and had been done to him”.

In other words, the disciples really had no idea at the time what was going on. But later, after Jesus’ death and resurrection, they were able to think back and realise the meaning of what they had experienced. Retrospective insight, it might be called.

One of the things the disciples thought about, afterwards, was the crowd calling out “Hosanna” to Jesus, and “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord”. Both these calls come from Psalm 118, where they refer to pilgrims coming to the temple in Jerusalem, calling for God’s salvation and receiving God’s blessing as they arrive. The early Christians took this call of the crowd and applied it particularly to Jesus, including it in their prayers and praise with Holy Communion, which we still do today when we sing the Sanctus, “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” as part of our Communion liturgy, applying it particularly to Jesus coming to us as we pray and praise.

Another Hebrew Scripture was also retrospectively seen as applying to Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem. Jesus himself must have been deliberately fulfilling the prophecy from Zechariah when he found a young donkey on which to ride, a symbol in Zechariah of the coming of the king of peace.

Then in our Philippians reading we have a marvellous early insight about who Jesus is. Paul wrote the letter to the Philippians probably around 54AD, some 25 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. It’s one of the earliest pieces of Christian writing we have. Embedded in chapter 2 however, is a statement of belief, a creed about Jesus, not written by Paul but quoted by him. Our very earliest creed is probably nothing more than “Jesus is Lord” but here in Philippians we have a much longer affirmation about Jesus as “in the form of God”, emptying himself in obedience, humbling himself to the point of accepting death by crucifixion, but now raised to new life with God in heaven and lauded as God himself. Some unknown Christian has written it, probably less than 20 years after Jesus’ death and resurrection, looking back over Jesus’ life and ministry, and recognising who Jesus is – God himself come to earth in human form. It’s a beautiful statement of faith, astonishing in the depth of its insight as to the nature of Jesus, identifying Jesus as Lord and God.

But Paul uses it in his letter to the Philippians as far more than just a creedal statement. He applies this early creed to the tensions and divisions which are damaging the life of the church in Philippi. He exhorts them to “let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus”, drawing particular attention to the compassion, humility and sacrificial obedience of Jesus,

saying that this is the attitude they should apply to one another in a church in danger of factionalising.

And he says even more than that. Did you notice that in the verses which follow this early creed, Paul writes “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure”? It is God who is at work in us, and in everyone who puts their faith in Christ. When we receive God’s love into our lives and our very being, and when we seek to live out God’s love for others, to pass it on, then we are not acting just as human beings. The Scripture is saying that God is at work in us, God is alive in us, something of God’s love and peace and power is operating in and through us – when we have placed our faith in God and know the joy of God’s love within us.

Isn’t that a spine-tingling realisation? We are not just ourselves, God is in us, helping us to have the right attitudes, the right “will”, and enabling us to work for God’s purposes of love and peace. This is the “same mind” that was in Christ Jesus, God in us.

Quite a number of us this past week have shared in our final Lenten study. This year’s studies have been on the four cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and courage. This week we looked at the courage of Jesus as he took the pilgrim road to Jerusalem despite knowing that opposition, hostility, arrest and execution likely awaited him there. We then pondered the Gethsemane event, Jesus praying on the Thursday night before his arrest that the cup of suffering might pass from him, although in faith accepting God’s will. His courage is hugely evident in these events. His courage was fed by his faith, by God in him, by his prayers to “My father”, by God enabling him to will and to work for God’s way.

It’s the same with us, friends. The way of Jesus, God’s way, is the way of humble service, the way of self-giving love. But God does not expect us to live that way merely in our own strength, somehow achieving it only with our own capacities. Rather, God works with us, his love empowers us to be more Christ-like, his love received, known and experienced, works in us as a wellspring enabling us to live with the same self-giving humility. True glory.

To the glory of God, Amen.

Hymn 681 Lord, let me see.

Chosen because it speaks of how we can open ourselves to allow God to work within us.