2nd Sunday before Lent – Sermon

As I read today’s lessons in preparing for preaching I had a distinct sense of *déjà vu*. As you heard the reading from the gospel I wonder if you had a similar feeling!

The prologue from St John’s gospel is something with which most of us is familiar. In fact we haven’t used it as much as we could during this past Christmas season. We used the Luke reading for Christmas Day. It was used elsewhere; I heard it on a radio service and saw it used on a television broadcast. We could have used it on a weekday in the following week. We didn’t use it on the 2nd Sunday of Christmas as we used the Epiphany readings. And here we are, beginning our preparation for Lent, and it crops up as the set reading for today. Reason enough for all of us to have a sense of *déjà vu*.

It set my mind to think of the meaning of *déjà vu*. We have a book called Phraseology, a compendium of definitions of phrases which appear in everyday speech. So I decided to look it up. As expected it says it is French, meaning literally “already seen”. What was less expected is that it was originally a technical term used in psychology.

But what caught my eye was that there were two similar expressions. *Deja lu* meaning “already read” – the feeling that one has already read the passage or one similar to it. Now that describes the feeling that I have when reading in bed – when I know I’ve read the same passage more than once and it’s time to turn out the light and go to sleep! And *deja vecu* – the experience of realizing that something said or done occurred previously in one’s experience. The place we’ve been to before but can’t remember when – the childhood memory which comes to life when a place is revisited decades later.

This may seem like a meaningless meander away from the biblical passages set for the day. It is far from that! All three of these phrases show ways in which we treat, or, more accurately, misuse well known passages of scripture. Which of us can truly say we didn’t know what was coming next? Which of us didn’t have the thought “seen that, done that”? Or even worse, “have I got to hear that again”?

Well, if you want my honest thoughts they were; “I wish I’d had a ‘fiver’ for every time I’ve preached on John1, how can I say anything fresh?” And, “I thought we’d finished the Advent, Christmas, Epiphany phase last week!” As my namesake said last Sunday, today we turn our face towards the crucifixion. So, I set out to look at the passage ‘through new eyes’.

At that point I realized that often we look to the gospel reading as the determinate one. The one which decides how we approach the other readings set for the day. That is not the case as we look to see how these readings point us into Lent and the passion of Jesus. The determinate passage for today is that from Proverbs. It comes from within the first ten chapters as we have them – the parts that come from the time of King Solomon. In Jewish thought Wisdom was thought of as female, even being referred to as Lady Wisdom.

In the passage we read Wisdom is described as the first creation of God. “The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago.” Wisdom predates the creation of the earth – before the “mountains and hills” were formed – before the formation of “earth and fields”. Wisdom was the companion of God “when he established the heavens”. Verses 27 to 30 go beyond that saying that Wisdom was created before the world to claim that Wisdom was actually there when subsequent acts of creation took place.

This concept of the centrality of Wisdom in the creation process can be traced through the writings of Ben Sirach. He wrote in Hebrew in Palestine in the early second century bc. Later an Alexandrian Jew writing in Greek produced the book known as the Wisdom of Solomon. In this he develops the thought about the relationship of God and Wisdom in the creation of the cosmos.

Some of the words from one or other of these writers appear in a number of books the New Testament; among them more than one of the letters of Paul and the letter to the Hebrews. But the passage which is closest to them is the prologue of John’s gospel:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life …”

The Word, *logos,* which was thought of as masculine, is a concept from Greek philosophy that was popular within the Roman world of the time. John marries together the female wisdom with the male *logos.* He doesn’t mention Jesus by name until verse 17, but his clear intention is to ensure his readers know that Jesus has been part of the Godhead from before time.

Seen in the light of the Proverbs passage, the prologue of John’s gospel is about all of eternity, past, present, and future. To him Wisdom/the Word have always been in the relationship which we call God. They have always been part of the God enterprise. The relationship which seeks to restore fallen humankind. The relationship which prompts atonement – at-one-ment between God and humanity. The relationship which breaks down the barriers between us and the things of God which had been erected by human faithlessness. Jesus is the living word which brings meaning to our lives. Seen in that context we can see that, like a dog, ‘John’s prologue isn’t just for Christmas!’ It is a bridge between the beginning of the earthly life of Jesus with all rest of the life and ministry of Jesus and the ongoing life of Christ in glory.

So, in our hearts and lives we need to leave the things of Christmas behind us and look resolutely towards Lent, Holy Week and Easter. We need to look towards how we will use Lent as a time to deepen our faith. To look at how our faith issues in our daily lives. How we show God’s love in the people we are and through the things we do.

Just because we have heard the prologue to John’s gospel before, we shouldn’t have a sense of déjà vu about it. Try and read it afresh – it may be that each of us can gain new insights. In preparing this sermon I looked at Richard Burridge’s commentary on John. He produced this for the Anglican bishops at the Lambeth Conference 2008 to use in their daily bible study in the 5 months leading up to the conference. I remember that we used it at the monthly bishop’s staff meeting as our bible study at the time. As I read it again I noticed the subtext of his introduction, It said of the gospel, *“A book in which a child may paddle but an elephant can swim deep”.* My first thought was to wonder what the bishops made of that – did they think of themselves as children or elephants? My second thought was that it was something we could all do – read and reflect on a passage from John’s gospel each day. Well, at least make a start as part of our Lenten discipline. In doing so we may gain wisdom and deepen our knowledge of God.

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