

Sunday 20 October, 2020

A sermon preached by the Revd Canon Dr Stephen Ames, at St Paul's Cathedral on the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Readings: Ephesians 2.1-10

This month the sermons at the Cathedral are focused on the Letter to the Ephesians, most likely written by a disciple of Paul, but numbered among genuine letters of Paul as the inspiration of the letter, if not its literal author

I read the main concern of this letter to be the mystery of Christ. Paul prays we may have the power to comprehend the breadth, length, height, and depth of this mystery. The prayer is surely needed for this mystery is mind bending, and heart rending.

It is Paul's task as an apostle to make everyone see what is the plan of this mystery, hidden for ages in God the creator of all things, but now revealed through Christ.

Let's pause to notice the word 'plan' here and find a surprise. In the Letter to the Ephesians the word translated as 'plan' is in Greek 'oikonomia', which is where we get our word 'economy'. So, Paul is talking about the divine economy for all things, which has been long hidden in God the creator but has now been revealed in Christ.

This might seem odd, since we are so used to the word economy referring to the markets for producing and selling goods and services, everywhere. A wag may think that Paul is telling us about a market God has set up, but this would be greatly mistaken.

The word oikonomia comes from two Greek words, 'oikos' meaning house, and 'nomos', meaning law or order. So oikonomia is the ordering of a household.

In the Ancient world the steward of a household would order the household according to the wishes of the master of the house to the benefit of all in the house. And the word for steward, was oikonomos, which is where we get our word economist.

The divine economy for the whole creation implies that the whole creation is like God's house and all creatures are part of God's household. Ephesians tells us that the divine economy is how God is bringing, and will bring, the whole household to the fullness of life in which everything in heaven and earth will be gathered up in Christ.

Some of you might be thinking this is big-picture stuff, indeed. It bends my mind but how does it rend my heart, how does it concern me? Well let me say it concerns you intimately, it concerns each of us intimately. And the big-picture will get bigger.

First, notice that while people had ideas about God or the gods and had experiences of God or the gods, even amazing spiritual experiences no one knew God as the Father of Jesus Christ, until Jesus came into the world. No one had access to the relationship between Christ and his Father, until the coming of Christ who opened the door into that relationship. A new thing came into the world with Christ Jesus and we have access to that relationship through Jesus' life, death and resurrection and the gift of the Spirit.

What does this big-picture story mean for you and me? It means that Jesus is God's way of opening to each of us the doorway into the inner life of God, to which people don't have access, just by being born.

You remember how Jesus said to Nicodemus, you must be born again, you must be born from above, that it is by being born of water and the Spirit that you enter the Kingdom of God.

Remember also Jesus saying to his disciples that no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son, and those to whom the Son reveals him.

What the letter to the Ephesians is teaching us is that the Spirit gives us access to the relationship between Jesus and his Father, and so we have been drawn into the divine economy for the whole creation.

When this long-hidden secret of the Kingdom of God came into the world through Christ, it provoked opposition on earth, and in heaven. The principalities and powers of heaven did not know that this was God's purpose, and they conspired to undermine it, as did earthly powers, both in Israel and in Rome, who likewise didn't have any idea that this was God's purpose.

Christ revealed the divine economy and thereby Christ also revealed how disordered and dark can be the ways human beings live. Human powers set up their own economies, that is, their own ways of ordering their lives, at home, at work, in towns, cities, and nations. These human economies come to function as surrogates for the divine economy and can even present themselves as approved by God, but they lie. You all remember the hymn, 'All things bright and beautiful' with its verse,

The rich man in his castle
The poor man at his gate,
God made them high and lowly
And ordered their estate.

The verse pretends to be about the divine economy, "God made them high and lowly and ordered their estate." That verse has been deleted from the hymn, and that makes you wonder how best to think about the divine economy for all things and what it implies for our lives today.

The social order represented by that verse is just a surrogate human economy, as indeed is the global economy, which COVID is threatening. All these draw on God's good gifts of the earth and human creativity but put them in the service of a human order that serves the golden rule – those who have the gold make the rules. Every human economy on whatever level is deeply ambiguous, with resonances and dissonances with the divine economy. That is why we need to be as innocent as doves and wise as serpents in living in the midst of this ambiguity.

The following was not used when the sermon was given as, because it would make it far too long. Preaching always involves choices – hopefully under God.

There is much more to say about the divine economy but here I just mention two things. One is emphasized in Ephesians. It is that in Christ a new humanity has been created, in which the old distinctions between Jew and Gentile no longer hold. One is not better or worse, closer to or further away from God. We see this also in Galatians 3:28, where Paul says that in Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, nor 'male and female', but all are one in Christ. This points us to the divine economy that has been revealed in Christ. Paul was particularly exercised in working out the first of these. The second was addressed from the end of the 18c. by William Wilberforce and others. It is still a pressing matter today. The third began to be addressed in the later part of the 20c. Do you see how the divine economy for the whole creation reaches deep into the way we live, calling us all to a better life. And of course, there is more.

Secondly, Ephesians tells us the divine economy for the whole creation has been revealed in Christ. There will of course be questions about how this understanding of the ordering of the whole creation is related to what the sciences now show us about the 'whole creation'. We should be hopeful here, especially given the old teaching about God being the author of two books, 'the book of nature' and 'the book of scripture'. Because there is only one author, the two books cannot be in fundamental contradiction when both are correctly interpreted. But more on that will have to wait for another time.

Ephesians wants us to grasp that in revealing the divine economy, Christ also revealed how disordered and dark can be the ways human beings live. But this disorder was no deterrent to God's purpose, as if God is surprised by human disorders, as if God had to send Christ as God's Plan B. No, no, no. There is no Plan B. There is only the plan, the divine economy, God's eternal purpose that is being worked out through Christ.

God was always going to become incarnate. God was always going to establish in the world an opening into the inner life of God through Christ, while knowing from the foundation of the world the deadly opposition that would try to shut it down.

It is Christ's love for us that he endured all the spiritual and human opposition all the way to death, as it attempted to break the relationship between the Son and the Father. But the relationship was not broken. The opposition was defeated on the cross, and God is revealed to be utterly vulnerable, and utterly invincible.

The Father raised Jesus from the dead, vindicating him against all opposition, all betrayal, all desertion and so the opening into God's own life is still open! Yet even more, transformed by the resurrection it has expanded so that all things in heaven and earth will enter into the life of God, through the opening that Christ opens, the opening that Christ is.

Here in this Eucharist we celebrate the divine economy for the whole creation. We again hear the Word of life and receive the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ. We are given access to the life of the Triune God, all made possible by Christ who through his pierced body and his shed blood kept open this opening into the life of God for us and, as we say over the cup, for the many, for all.

We live our lives in the power of the divine economy amidst the myriad of human economies that shape our everyday life, to allow the grace in which we stand to overflow into our lives, to expand the resonances and redeem the dissonances. These are the good works God has prepared for us to walk in.

To do this we need to reflect on our life and times in the light of our faith, trusting we will be led by Spirit to learn to discern aright. This is what we are doing on Wednesday evenings and the Cathedral notes gives you the zoom link if you wish to join.

Here is a sample. When Helen Reddy sang the song 'Woman', were there any resonances and dissonances between the song and the divine economy revealed in Christ? It may help or not to know that at the end of the song and after acknowledging the applause Helen said, 'Let us thank God who makes all this possible.'