

Sermon

Sunday 3 January 2021

John 1: 10-18

Introduction

Our reading from the beginning of John's Gospel almost takes on a different emphasis when we omit the first ten verses – the “in the beginning was the word” bit.

John's introduction to his account of the life of Jesus much more than a piece of philosophical scene setting. It is also a proper introduction in that it gives the reader an idea of what is going to happen as the narrative unfolds.

And the structure of these eight versus is stark. John writes as a series of percussive blows. Strikes with a hammer.

More than that. A call and a response. A crash of an impact and an echo in reply.

Light of the world

William Holman Hunt, the pre-Raphaelite painter, painted the famous light of the world picture showing Jesus knocking on an overgrown door, holding a lantern in his other hand.

The opening to John's gospel could not be any more different. No gentle knocking. Great blows. Cosmic in scale. Like something you might see through the Hubble telescope. Great impacts as great meteorites hammer into the surface of a planet.

The Word

Having established that Jesus – the Word – is God himself, John gives us the first impact in verse ten.

He was in the world. Crash. The world did not recognise him (echo).

He came to that which was his own (crash). But his own did not receive him (echo).

Yet to all who did receive him (crash). He gave the right to become children of God. Clunk! Loud resounding echo.

The word became flesh and made his dwelling amongst us. Crash!

A relentless bombardment. God trying to break through. Like canon balls striking the walls of a besieged city and every now and then a great cry going up as stone falls away and a great breach appears.

The Scene is Set

And so, the scene is set for the Gospel. God's onslaught on the world. Will he give up? Will he win in the end? Read on.

Grace

It is strange to think that these blows – this great onslaught – is best described as the grace of God.

My dictionary defines grace as “smoothness and elegance of movement”. John's language is hardly smooth and elegant.

This is another meaning: the undeserved favour of God. And John believes that grace comes in a bombardment. In verse 16 he states, “from the fullness of his grace we have received one blessing after another” . Blow after blow.

By verse 16 we have John's great themes established. His model if you like.

A God who never gives up. A God of amazing grace. A God who relentlessly bombards his people with grace.

And a world in open rebellion to God. A world determined to do things its own way.

Except. A big except. Except for those people who respond. And in John's model that response is called faith.

The crash is grace. Often there is no echo back. When it does come it is the response of faith. The echo-response is faith.

Or evidence of faith. Or just enough faith to give a response.

It all fits

It all fits perfectly. Grace, faith and a naturally rebellious world. And yet how different this is from what most people would consider faith to be.

The response is rare. He was in the world but the world did not recognise him. He came to that which was his own but his own did not receive him.

Faith in my dictionary means “complete trust or confidence in someone or something” or “a strongly held belief”.

John’s definition of faith is a receptiveness to God’s grace. Perhaps not even a strong receptiveness. Just enough.

Less than a mustard seed’s worth perhaps.

Faith is a response. It is not something dreamed up from inside. It is not something which we have to conjure up from deep within ourselves. It is not something we have to nurture day be day. It is not something we have to screw up our eyes and try hard at.

Yet we live in a world in which faith has come to mean firmly held conviction in the face of evidence which would suggest otherwise. A belligerent view that refuses to acknowledge what most people would call facts.

This is not what John tells us. At its heart, faith is a response to an initiative from God, not an initiative of our own.

John's World

Now see the world through John's eyes. A world being showered with God's grace but mostly remaining rebellious. But, here and there, signs of a response and a recognition. Signs of faith.

Yet something does not fit. A few weeks ago, our reading from Mark's gospel painted a picture of the whole world flocking to John the Baptist. A repentant world.

All four Gospel accounts include the story of John the Baptist. It is so important. Certainly, in Mark's gospel it is clear that everyone is receptive. Mark shows us the whole world has the capacity to respond to God's grace.

John is making a slightly different point. The grace of God demands not just the response of faith but obedience too.

Verse 17. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

Through John's Gospel we see what one commentator has called the dynamics of faith: acceptance of who Jesus is and dedication of one's life to God.

As you read on through John's gospel, you will see the picture repeat and repeat. A huge response to Jesus – a response of faith one might say. And yet we see faithful people failing to become obedient.

And we also see obedient people – following the law to the letter, failing to respond to God's great act of grace.

John's Gospel

Having started with the eternal Word, at the beginning of all things, it is easy to things from God's point of view. You can almost shout the action and whisper the reaction.

He was in the world. The world did not recognise him

He came to that which was his own. But his own did not receive him.

Yet to all who did receive him (crash).He gave the right to become children of God.

By Easter, the roles will have been reversed.

Pilate's: I find no basis of charge against (this man Jesus.)

The crowd: **Crucify him. Crucify him.**

What will 2021 Hold in Store

In his account of Jesus's life and teachings, John reminds us that we are put on earth not to make plans or be determined to get our own way but to respond to God's grace.

To respond to blessing after blessing. To respond to the grace of God in sending Jesus, his Son, the Word made flesh.

And – as we read on about what Jesus taught – to respond to other in the light of what God has done for each of us.

A shared faith is a shared response. The church is built on foundations created out of a unity of response, not a uniformity of dogma. The unity born out of a loving response to God's grace and Christ's teaching.

How sad it is that this Christmas, a secular world has tried to keep Christmas the same despite the plight facing the entire planet's population, whereas the true spirit of Christmas demands the opposite: a loving response to the situation we find ourselves in.

I am sure that response is there. We have yet to hear the stories of the grace of God at work in Christmas 2020. They may not have reached our newspaper headlines or the corridors of power. After all, it was humble shepherds the angel chose to tell first.

In a similar way, the world's response to the pandemic has yet to be seen. The superficial consequences on the economy for example are already being identified.

I think there will be much more profound and long-lasting changes because the pandemic will have changed us. People will have changed. Nobody on the planet is unaffected. The world will not be the same again. And unlike the virus, there is no vaccine to protect us from these changes.

If 2020 was the Christmas in which all governments felt powerless, who has held the real power? What will be the response?

Amen