

The people of God

30 April 2023

Joshua 24.1,2,13-18

Fourth Sunday of Easter

John 15.1-8

Rev. Alan Keeler

The age of St. Mary's

Our church gets quite a number of visitors. Initially they are held in awe by the building. The chancel murals are stunning, the stained glass windows a very impressive and just its size creates a great impression.

The usual question is then 'when was the church built'. I say that the central part of the nave is 1863. The chancel at the end and the transepts on the side were completed by about 1900. I round off the description by saying building has continued with a porch in 1997, the Twinkles area was developed in 2018 and the lighting was upgraded in 2019. The point I want to make is that a church building is a continual work in progress.

It may be for some people all of this sounds like a long period of time. Compared with our lives it does seem long. But our real heritage goes back much longer than that.

Time passing in the Bible

I remember when I started reading the Bible being quite astonished about the amount of time being described. There were many generations of people. There were exploits of leaders being described and then being succeeded by other people time and time again. There is a sense about life being long distance race, each runner mattering but inevitably passing the baton on to someone else.

There were the rising and falling of nations. People who considered their power and empire to be irresistible and eternal but in reality might only last a few centuries.

In the Bible all of these are surrounded by reflections on God's presence and purposes. So many issues are explored in terms of history, rules for living, celebrations of wisdom and expressions of grief over what goes wrong. But the writers of the Bible are convinced that God has purposes they wish to understand and to be able to play their part.

Challenge

Our reading from the Old Testament has Joshua at one of these moments of handing the baton over. He calls the tribes of Israel to Shechem.

There have been the immense events of the Hebrews having left Egypt through the Red Sea. They have come through their time in the wilderness. They have now taken hold of the promised land. All of this has been by the hand of God. Joshua lays a challenge before the people and asks 'are you going to serve the Lord who is given you all of this deliverance, or are you going to serve the gods of the land you now inhabit?'

That question would resonate through the centuries that followed and the place of Shechem continued to be very significant

Shechem

Shechem features in the call of Abraham who is the father of the Israelites. It is where God establishes a covenant with Abraham which is promised for Abraham's descendants forever.

During the period of the Judges, Shechem is a place of Canaanite worship which was always considered corrupt and a temptation for the Hebrew nation to abandon the true God.

After King Solomon it was at Shechem that the monarchy and the nation divided with a Northern Kingdom and a Southern Kingdom that weakened their national life.

After the period of the exile Shechem was the principle city of the Samaritans whose worship was always considered corrupt by the people who became known as the Jews.

Finally there are suggestions that Shechem was also called Sychar which is where Jesus met the woman at the well and brought her and her neighbours to see him as the Messiah.

Over some 1300 years the place of Shechem had events of significance, witnessed the rising and a falling of the nation and finally the presence of the fulfilment of God's purposes for that nation as Jesus steps into the picture. And that was 2000 years ago.

Landscape and portrait

I say all of this because I think it helps get a sense of perspective when we look at church life. Following this service we will have our annual meeting. Just looking at a year in the life of the church can be a bit demanding. Hearing reports and choosing people to represent our life may seem a bit remote from the week by week life that we share together.

But not only are we here in this amazing building but we are in the long tradition and history of the people that God is working with.

A couple of weeks ago Gill and I were in Edinburgh and we visited the Scottish National Gallery. Obviously the main event was to visit a new grandson but there was time to take in some culture as well.

There were magnificent works of art some of them huge in size and they were of landscapes some of them containing hundreds of people. But there were also portraits, physically smaller and paying attention in great detail to one or a few people.

To make sense of life you need both the landscape and the portrait.

The true vine

Our Old Testament reading opened the door onto a wide landscape of the work of God. Our New Testament reading was more of a portrait given to us by Jesus.

Jesus took the image of a vine. This was itself a symbol of Israel in the Old Testament. The prophets spoke of the nation having been planted like a vine by God. It was nurtured by his hand and was to be the source of abundant fruit in showing the world the person of their God.

Jesus speaks about the way that he is the fulfilment of his nation. He uses the image of a vine as an invitation for everyone to come and be part of God's life.

Vines, like a number of plants are used in a flexible way by farmers. Quite often part of one plant might be very good for roots. But another plant might have branches that are good for producing fruit. The farmer understands the varieties and how to bring them together by grafting a good fruiting branch on to a good root stock.

Jesus is describing himself as a good root stock. He is the one that is the source of true life. He invites everybody to come and be grafted into himself. In doing this we find new life in him and he promises that we might know true fruitfulness in our lives.

When Jesus uses the image of a vine it is both at the size of a portrait because it's about us. We have a need for life. As we follow Christ we receive his spirit and our lives flourish.

But Jesus image of a vine is also at the size of the landscape because Christ welcomes everybody. We have a life together as a Christian community we are bound together and nourished together by Christ. So we speak of fellowship, the body of Christ, the worldwide church and the communion of saints

People of vocation

It can be very tempting in our day and age with consumerism almost pressed upon us to see life in terms of portrait. What is it we want? What is the part that makes sense to ourselves? What will fulfil me?

But I think God is calling us to a size of life that is truly awesome like a landscape. This might be too much to take in or be rather confusing or we don't feel equipped for.

But the invitation is one of love. For God always loved his people through the ups and downs of life illustrated by Shechem. God has loved humanity even when it means Jesus must suffer to demonstrate who God is.

We are invited to be in Christ, to be in the love of God. Jesus says he is the true vine and as we give ourselves to him the huge issues of life are things we can face. We embrace them with all of those who are also grafted into him and in doing so we become fruitful and take our place in handing on the baton as God leads us.