

In these January sermons we are tracing the whole course of the history of our salvation. This began last week with mankind's fall from grace, the story of our original disobedience. Today we begin to see how God did not leave us in our sins but began straight away to come to our help. Go back in your imagination 1700 years or so before the birth of Christ. See Abraham on the plains of Mamre in the Negev.

*And the Lord appeared to Abraham in the plains of Mamre: and he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day. And lo three men stood by him. And when he saw them he ran to meet them from the tent door and bowed himself to the ground and said, My Lord*

These three strange visitors – they are a prefiguring of the Three Persons of the Blessed Trinity. On another occasion, nearly two millennia before there was any Christianity, Abraham also meets another mysterious stranger: Melchizedek

*And Melchizedek, King of Salem, brought forth bread and wine and he was the priest of the Most High God.*

His name comes from two Hebrew words *melchi* meaning a king and *zedek* meaning righteous. So Melchizedek is the righteous king bringing forth bread and wine – a prefiguring of Our Lord and the bread and wine of the Holy Communion. So you see, from the first, God is active, leaving these hints and prophecies in history – like layers in the rocks – so that when these hints become actualised in Christian reality we can see them for what they were. In the New Testament Epistle to the Hebrews, we find the words, *Thou art a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek*. And these words are addressed to Christ

Of course, Abraham did not have the doctrine of the Trinity and he knew nothing about the Holy Communion. He saw only these puzzling visions or types, but we looking back, after the coming of Christ, can see these types and shadows as prophecies of the Christian revelation

Think of that strange and really rather unsettling story of Abraham being called to sacrifice his son Isaac. God does not allow him to go through with it. But instead in due course, in the fullness of time, God gives his only Son Jesus Christ to be a sacrifice for *our* sins. The ancient religion of the Old Testament taught its adherents to make sacrifices to God. This whole order of things is turned upside down by Christian redemption in which *God* sacrifices for *our* sake.

Thus there began in the distant past a whole series of stories about God's redemptive acts prefiguring the fullness of redemption that is by Christ. Recall the tall story of Noah and the ark. A tall story, sure enough. But you remember how it ends, with the rainbow, marking God's covenant with his people. Now cast your mind forward to what this service is which we are performing here today: you will hear me speak at the altar of the Body and Blood of Christ as *the New Covenant*

Think next of Israel's deliverance from Egypt. The crossing the Jordan as a metaphor for overcoming death. This is the meaning picked up by the later Christian hymn:

*When I tread the verge of Jordan, bid my anxious fears subside; death of death and hell's destruction, land me safe on Canaan's side.* The death of death is actually brought about by the resurrection of Christ.

1200 hundred years before Christ the Israelites were given the Law, the Ten Commandments. And it is The Ten Commandments, the Law, that creates freedom. Freedom is not, as naughty children imagine and revolting university students in Paris thought forty years ago, lawlessness. Without the law there is chaos, bedlam, madness, anarchy, barbarism, the war of all against all. When we say the Commandments, the Law, are the gift of God, we are expressing in religious language the observable truth that any successful society has to have at its centre these rules, or something very like them.

Ah but a few hundred years later, God, through his prophets, becomes very explicit about what he intends to do. The prophet Isaiah lived 700 years before Christ. But this is what he said all that time ago: *Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Immanuel.*

And again he said,

*For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulders. And his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.*

We're not meant to imagine that Isaiah closed his eyes and saw a vision of Bethlehem and the stable and the manger. Prophetic utterance is ecstatic speech, like visionary poetry. The pressure of inspired revelation comes over the prophet and he is forced to utter words which he barely understands. But because inspired prophecy is from God, the words will turn out to have a very clear meaning if you wait until the proper time. And behold, there came the proper time, seven hundred years later and a virgin did conceive and unto us a child was born.

We come forward a little further, still hundreds of years before the birth of Christ, and we discover these shocking and moving words:

*He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Surely he hath borne our griefs and carried away our sorrows: He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him, and by his stripes we are healed. He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter.*

Shocking and moving. The very rhythm and cadence of them is like the Way of the Cross. Hear these words and you see Christ carrying his Cross. You look for proofs of God's existence and you want to know for certain that he cares for you and that he has redeemed you. But this sort of proof, this sort of certainty is not only in words. It is in these true prophecies which God planted firmly, purposefully, definitely, in history – like a man laying down good wines in his cellar. And, as he says, the purpose of the prophecies is *so that when the time cometh, ye might be not faithless but believe*

Listen again, if you can, to those terrible words in Psalm 22, again composed hundreds of years before Christ:

*They pierced my hands and my feet. All they that see me laugh me to scorn saying, He trusted on the Lord that he would deliver him; let him deliver him if he will have him*

There you have it, a startlingly explicit prediction of Good Friday

The prophet, known as the later Isaiah, becomes even more specific:

*He made his grave with the wicked and with the rich in his death*

So specific. So particular. The unmistakable prevision of the thieves on the crosses on Calvary and the rich man Joseph of Arimathea who provided Christ's tomb. All foretold hundreds of years before the events

I have extracted for you this morning parts of the prophetic story. Now the inner psychological, spiritual reality is that the inspired poetry is proof of God's redemptive work going on even in fallen mankind. The miracle is that we can be moved by it and respond to it. This is because God does not give us up. We are not totally depraved. St Irenaeus speaks of the *Imago Dei*, the image of God implanted in us. This is how we are able to respond to God. Original Sin, vile as it is, can never obliterate God's image within us. Thus we are able to move, be it ever so feebly towards the light.

And there Jesus Christ is waiting for us with arms outstretched.