

FRAMING OUR EXISTENCE

St Michael's Cornhill

Second Sunday Before Lent

Sunday February 8th 2015

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It's not often that one finds an evening at the cinema so gripping as to make one want to go out the next day to do something about it. That, however, was our experience just before Christmas. We went to see the film about Professor Alan Turing and the cracking of the Enigma Code. I had never realised how significant this whole process had been in saving lives. It's almost certain that by cracking the code at least two million lives were saved. Once the allies cracked the code without the enemy knowing this, they could decode all the messages they intercepted and take remedial action. It completely reordered the terms of the conflict.

So, off we went the next day to Bletchley Park and saw some of the equipment they used and read more of the story. The psychological, emotional and intellectual energy that went into breaking this code was extraordinary. At certain moments there were key breakthroughs – somehow Turing would see the next stage in cracking the code, and gradually would see how the whole thing fitted together. The process took its toll on Turing, but the final results changed the lives of millions and the impact of their work has helped us to live even as we do now.

Now I start here, since those three most splendid readings for today set the scene for understanding a similar but even more crucial code. This time it is a code which goes beyond the strategic and tactical deployment of military forces. Instead it is a code, a framework which underpins the very basis of our existence. Let me begin with that passage from Proverbs. We heard these words:

‘The Lord created me at the beginning of his work . . . ages ago before the beginning of the earth...’

So it goes on, lyrically describing how God created the earth through his *wisdom*. The Book of Proverbs, alongside Job, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon and some of the apocryphal books form part of what is known as the ‘wisdom literature’ within the Old Testament and later biblical literature. Indeed, eventually the word wisdom is almost seen as a manifestation of God's very being, rather like talk of the Holy Spirit.

In the light of this, our two New Testament readings are fascinating since they pick up the same sort of language. Almost certainly they intend the reader to recognise the resonance of the Old Testament wisdom tradition. So, there is that magical piece from the second letter to the Colossians

‘Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him were all things in heaven and on earth created.’

You can almost immediately see how similar themes to that piece from Proverbs are echoed. Almost certainly the whole of this passage is a hymn which predates Paul’s letter, and which was sung in one of the earliest Christian communities. It may well have been well known. Paul uses it here as he writes to the Christians at Colossae. Elsewhere Paul also picks up similar hymns. That famous passage in Philippians where we read of God emptying himself and becoming one of us in Jesus, such that ‘at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow,’ is just such a similar pre-Pauline hymn.

Then, of course, we come to the gospel passage from the prologue to John’s Gospel. It’s the passage used on every Christmas Eve and often on Christmas morning too. Once again, very similar themes are echoed: ‘In the beginning was the word.’ The Greek for *word* is *logos* and it means more than just simply word. It means reason, design, or indeed wisdom. It describes the pattern of God’s vision for creation, which is incarnated in Jesus.

In the past, this passage, written in the simplest and most lucid Greek was assumed to be pure antique Greek philosophy. In the past half century, however, virtually all scholars recognise that Greek thought though it is, it is soaked in all the resonances of the Jewish wisdom tradition. It is a perfect mixture of Greek and Hebrew theology. So, Jesus, whose birth we celebrated less than two months ago, and whose passion, death and resurrection we shall celebrate in less than two months’ time is the personal incarnation of that pattern behind creation, about whose existence the Hebrews wrote for more than a millennium.

‘All things came into being through him, in him was life, and that light was the life of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not comprehend it.’

That word *comprehend* has a splendid ambiguity. It means did not understand, as indeed we still use it. Like Turing’s breaking of the Enigma code, Jesus reveals God’s pattern for the universe. But comprehend here also means that the darkness could not envelope or extinguish the light. Now the code, the pattern, the reason, *logos* and word of God is there for all to see, understand, participate in and celebrate. In Jesus not only do we see what creation is about, in Jesus creation is also redeemed for ever and to all eternity. Amen

Readings Proverbs. 8. 1, 22-31
 Col. 1., 15-20
 John. 1., 1-14.