

A New Covenant

The opening line of our Gospel describes the coming of the first Gentiles looking for Jesus. He recognises that the moment he has warned about as “the Hour” has struck. Jesus has said that he will lay down his life for the sheep: but he has also said that there are other sheep “not of this flock” that he must lead as well. Now these strangers have arrived, it is time for him to lay down his life.

Now that the hour has recognisably come, Jesus is to be “raised up” in Crucifixion, resurrection, ascension and glorification. His way of expressing this readiness is enshrined in the little parable of the seed that falls to the ground and dies. Only through this death can the seed become fruitful, and so fulfil its nature. Once more the Gospel assures us that there is nothing accidental about Jesus’ death; the Resurrection is not a repair job on a life that was damaged by the will of evil men. It is rather the glorification of the process of laying down of life, the revelation that this laying-down *is* itself the glory of Christ, the ikon of God’s nature, the dramatic epiphany of the inner life of the Trinity.

Our Lenten scripture study came to an end on Friday, with the realisation that the death of Jesus displays a total revolution in evaluating the world. For the fourth Gospel, the world is to be judged correctly only by the light of eternity, the light which was described in the prologue:

In him was life, life that was the light of men;
the light shines in darkness, and the darkness did not defeat it.

Viewed from the viewpoint of the Son of God, life looks quite different from the way it appears to a worldly eye. Jesus does not cling to his divine station, but empties himself to assume the condition of a slave, and becomes what we are; and this pouring forth of his life doesn’t stop at any point. He is humbler yet, even to accepting death, and death on the Cross at that.

Saving your life in the worldly sense - reaching old age - does not have any trace of that deepest reality in Jesus. To have escaped the Cross would have been entirely false for him: “was it not for this that I came into the world?” To have understood this about Jesus has been a great revelation. It soon becomes clear that the earthly success of our life is of tiny importance, compared with the Lord’s invitation to copy his pattern of generosity. We have continually found in our study the insistence that losing one’s life (as the world sees it) is actually the main aim of being alive. Those who don’t do it, have actually failed. So if you make it through to three score years and ten with all your marbles intact, having succeeded in all your plans, acquiring wealth, influence, and power in the world, having founded a powerful dynasty of sons and daughters, enjoying the honour of your professional colleagues and the civic authorities, it may mean precisely nothing when you are screwed into the wooden overcoat, and begin the embarrassingly short process of being comprehensively forgotten by the world in which you made your home.

The real purpose that should inspire us is to lose our life in this same passing world, to bear witness to the call of Christ, and to learn how to make the space we take up in the world fruitful for the life to come. This is what it means to accept Christ, to believe in him, and to follow him. These are our defining deeds, which give us the power to become children of God, *begotten not by blood, nor by carnal desire, nor by the will of man, but of God himself*. This is the new Covenant Jeremiah foresaw; and it is engraved on the heart of Christ. Our attention to him, above all in the days of Easter, is in the hope that it may be written on our hearts too, and become our nature, as it was his.