

Advent 4, December 22nd, 2024

6.00 Holy Communion with Healing Prayer

Luke 1.39-55

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

The advent hymn “O come, O come Emmanuel” is, as I guess many of you will know, based on what are known as the advent antiphons. Antiphons are compilations of scriptural words that in the medieval church were sung before and after the singing of the Magnificat, Mary’s song that we have just heard in its original context. Whilst these are still in use in catholic churches, and indeed there are antiphons, for every day of the year, the advent antiphons are the only ones that are still in use in any form in the Anglican church. The antiphon for today is given in your service sheet, with the Latin title is “O rex Gentium”

O King of the nations and their desire, the cornerstone that makes both one: come, and save man, whom you formed out of the dust of the earth.

As I said, the antiphons are a compilation of scriptural verses. In this case we begin with we have the vision of John in Revelation 15 of the worship of the saints and angels in heaven.

And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb: ‘Great and amazing are your deeds, Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, King of the nations!’

Then from the prophet Haggai, foretelling the coming of the Messiah.

I will shake all the nations, so that the desire of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendour, says the Lord of hosts.

There is some ambiguity here about what “desire of the nations” means – perhaps a reference to the Messiah, perhaps simply a reference to gold and silver. Then, perhaps the core of the antiphon, the idea of the capstone or cornerstone, that can be found in a variety of biblical verses. There is again some ambiguity in the scriptural verses as to whether this refers to the cornerstone – the foundation, the first stone to be laid, or the capstone – the last stone to be inserted in the top of the arch that enables it to support itself. From Isaiah 28

Therefore, thus says the Lord God, See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation.

Words of course that Jesus applied to himself in the gospels this time quoting Psalm 118

Have you not read this scripture: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone;

And that Paul applied to the church in Ephesians,

..... built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.

In the same letter he also talks of Jesus as the bringer of peace between Jew and Gentile

For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,

Jesus is the one who brings reconciliation and peace. The antiphon ends with a call for God to intervene, to save, bring salvation to, humanity, which is of course the core of the gospel, and a reminder of human frailty that were formed from the dust – again echoing scripture, this time from the early chapters of Genesis

Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.

For us in the twenty first century, I guess this might seem a really odd way of using scripture, of taking bits from here and there and putting them together. But this was a typical Jewish and early Christian practice – we can see it particularly in the gospel of Matthew, where he takes scriptural verses, from what to us is wildly out of context, and puts them together with others, to reflect on the coming of Jesus. And the antiphons have proved over the centuries to be a powerful context for meditation on who God is. So tonight, let's reflect on today's antiphon – what do these words have to say to us.

O Rex Gentium is a call for God to save humanity in all its frailty.

come, and save man, whom you formed out of the dust of the earth.

But saved from what? From the sin that separates us from God, from the powers of evil that assail us and to bring us safely through this life to the eternal life that is promised. That is true certainly. But being saved, salvation is about more than that. One meaning of salvation is being made whole, being made as God wants us to be, here and now and not just in eternity. And the prayer is for all humanity; for the church, for each one of us to be made whole, to be restored to what we are meant to be – at its deepest level it is a prayer for healing for wholeness. Something that that all humanity so badly needs, in all its uncertainties and conflicts; something the church badly needs with all the issues facing it, with its frailties only too exposed, in all its divisions; and something we all need, particularly as the transience and frailty of our own bodies becomes more and more apparent.

But to whom do we make this prayer? To Jesus of course – the king of the nations, the one to whom all authority and power has been given; the one who fulfils our deepest desires and aspirations, the bringer of peace and reconciliation. Our prayer is to one whose kingship is not of this world, who embraced the path of suffering; the one who has borne our sins and our infirmities on the cross.

But our prayer is also to Jesus the cornerstone or the capstone. The cornerstone as I said is the first to be laid, the one that marks out the direction and form of the building in all three directions. Get the cornerstone wrong, and all else goes awry. The capstone is the

last – the one that hold the arch together and stops it collapsing. The image points to Jesus as the basic foundation for society, for church and for ourselves; the one who sets the form of our lives and our future; the one who holds all things together when they seem to be falling apart; the ground of all being to use a modern phrase.

So, a prayer for salvation, to be made whole, and a call to build our lives upon the ultimate authority, on the foundation of Jesus, and when things are falling apart, to make him the capstone of our lives that holds everything together. The antiphons were of course used in the context of the Magnificat and in some ways are meditations on the song of Mary. The king, the cornerstone, the capstone of O Rex Gentium is the baby in Mary's womb, the one whose birth we will celebrate in a few days' time. He is the one who brings ultimate wholeness and healing. We end with the very well know verses of Charles Wesley, when he uses a different biblical image (from Malachi this time) but again sets out the basis of our healing, our wholeness, and our eternal hope.

Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
risen with healing in his wings.
Mild he lays his glory by,
born that we no more may die,
born to raise us from the earth,
born to give us second birth.