

Home Worship for January 2018 – Revd Bruce Jarvis

7th January 2018 (Epiphany Sunday)

He parted the heavens and came down : Psalm 18:9

Read Numbers 24:17-19, Psalm 18:1-9 and Matthew 2:1-12

What thoughts and ideas do you take with you into 2018 from the lovely time of Advent and Christmas, and now this feast of Epiphany? It's so easy for us to be just sentimental about the whole Christmas thing, especially when we reflect on Christmases past. It's certainly true that, alongside all the hard work and busyness, the Christmas period does produce much kindness and warmth and generosity. But is that all we're left with as the decorations come down, and we get on with another year? Is there not more to recall and rejoice in from Christmas than happy, sentimental memories? Is there nothing deeper, of eternal value, for us to reflect on, to treasure, and to use over the coming days and months?

The world had been waiting so long for God's promise to be fulfilled. For the Jewish people, who formed the Church of that day, the promise had become so distorted that all they hoped for was a messiah to save them from their enemies, and restore their nation to its rightful status. Once it was past the early phase of devotion to the risen Lord, the Christian Church also descended into darkness. A desire for earthly power and riches led the Church into a concoction of compromised doctrinal agreements that distorted the understanding of who and what God is. How easily we human beings become so distracted by earthly and natural attractions that we lose the essence and core of what life is really about. We can see that in our Christmas celebrations, when the true, essential message is easily lost in all the noise of materialism and self-indulgence. That's why our Lord has to keep coming to us, to pull us back from the brink.

Those Magi we read about in the Word were among the small number of people who were able to recognise the fulfilment of ancient prophecies, and to whom God could reveal His coming amongst us. Balaam's prophecy of a star appearing was fulfilled when their minds were opened to see the light of heaven, just as those simple, faithful shepherds were able to see the angelic choir appearing in heaven to celebrate God's birth as a baby in Bethlehem. There was no hesitation. The Magi knew they had to make the long journey, led by the star shining in their minds, until they could worship the new-born king and present Him with their gifts.

How vital it is in this day and age for faithful followers of the risen and glorified Lord Jesus Christ to focus our celebrations, and then our daily living, on the one God of heaven and earth. How vital it is, for ourselves and for the whole of humanity, that there are people who know Him, and who honour and worship Him for His comings to His people. He came in His humanity to lead His people out of darkness and into the light. He always knew from the beginning that He would have to do this, and the Old Testament Scriptures bear witness to His intention and readiness. The New Testament bears witness to His coming, and how that took place. It tells us, too, how God lived in human form, and what He did to glorify that human so that the Son and the Father became one.

The New Testament also testifies to the Lord's intention to reveal Himself even more completely in a second coming in time, not in a personal incarnation but in a further revelation of truth. The clouds of heaven, the letter of the Holy Word, would be opened up to allow men and women to understand so much more, and to see and think in heavenly light.

As we have remembered and celebrated God's first coming, may we also celebrate the fulfilment of His promise to come once more. And alongside our outer celebrations, may we resolve to follow Him faithfully and devotedly in the way we live one with another, showing love, faith and obedience to Him and His Word.

***“He parted the heavens and came down;
dark clouds were under his feet.” Psalm 18:9***

Prayer. Lead me over the coming weeks and months to reflect on Your incarnation, and to see how Your saving life can bring about genuine changes in me. Guide me on my journey, and inspire me to want to worship You with my whole being. May faithfulness and obedience become my guiding stars. Amen.

14th January 2018

Being Bound Together : John 17:22

Read John Chapter 17, and then meditate on verses 20-26

The saying that “blood is thicker than water” is an ancient one, and no-one is quite sure of its origin. You might like to think about what the phrase means to you. It’s strange how these ideas can become part of a culture, and seem to be just accepted, often without much thought, by the majority of people. Like everything else, there is a grain of truth in it, but that’s about all! Of course, our family ties are important for us human beings. We gain so much from being part of close-knit family groups. Where these ties work well, they are of great use and support to us. But let’s be sure of one thing: the bonds that we’re able to forge with another person are not dependent upon our gene inheritance, or our common blood ancestry.

For me, the evidence and confirmation of a very different basis for relationships is provided in the teachings of the New Church, which suggest quite clearly that what links us to other people when we enter the spiritual dimension are not genealogical ties or any other physical or natural connections. No, what joins us together in intimate relationships, friendships and groups in the spiritual world are our affections and our common values and aspirations.

Our capacity to form relationships that are deep and long-lasting, and even eternal, is a gift from our Creator. It’s from His very creative drive that He wants to be as closely united with each one of us as we are willing to be. The limits to being linked with our Heavenly Father are all on our side. And the origin of those limitations, which mean that we often mess up other relationships, lies in His other great gift: human freedom and liberty.

Have you ever tried forcing someone to be a friend? Or tried forcing someone to love you? It can be an agonising, pointless exercise! You see, even our Maker cannot force us to love Him against our will. Love has to be given and received in freedom. Love cannot be coerced.

Even when we have discovered “love”, and established a relationship with someone, there still remain years and years of working at it, of developing our awareness of another’s needs, of becoming willing to listen as well as demand attention, of giving as well as receiving – and receiving as well as giving. There is no automatic, immediate perfect relationship. It doesn’t even happen between ourselves and our God – where there is the advantage of a perfect lover on one side! Our relationship with our God takes a lifetime, and longer, to become rock solid.

And that’s true for all other linkings and bindings that we seek to make with one another. It’s well-known that without the experience of love and affection, of trust and support when we are young, the God-given potential in us is severely weakened.

But the great thing is that our Heavenly Father yearns above all else for us to be united to Him and to one another. So he moves heaven and earth to provide opportunities where we can give freely and unconditionally of ourselves to the people around us. It’s what makes us truly human, angelic even. And it’s what can give us peace, security, acceptance and joy.

Prayer *Bind us together, Lord, so that it may be truly wise love that moves me in everything I do. May that binding also affect all my relationships, all my desires, and all my actions. Amen.*

21st January 2018 “One as we are One” (John 17:22)

Read John 17:20-26 and Arcana Caelestia 3451.1-2

You will notice that this week, which is the annual Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we are again looking at some verses from John 17. Meditate specifically this time on verses 22 and 23.

Jesus prayed, I have given them (all believers) the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one. I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity.....

What do you make of Jesus’ words? How do you act on them in your daily life, and in relationships with people of other denominations and faith groups? Think of situations involving friends and acquaintances. Might you have responded differently, or maybe thought differently? Are Jesus’ words a challenge to you?

Now read through this extract from our Church’s teachings, and then quietly think over again this matter of relationships and friendships that break through some of our man-made barriers:

AC 3451 (adapted)

It is the Word which joins the Lord's kingdom on earth with His kingdom in heaven, and so with the Lord Himself. The Church, which is the Lord's kingdom on earth, draws its teachings from the literal sense of the Word, so it is inevitable that these will be diverse. In other words, one group declares that a certain idea is the truth of faith because this is what it says in the Word. Another group declares that another idea is the truth because that likewise is stated there, and so on. Consequently, because its matters of doctrine are drawn from the literal sense of the Word the Lord's Church differs from one group to the next, and not only from group to group but sometimes from individual to individual within a group. But disagreement in matters of teachings to do with faith does not mean that the Church cannot be one Church, provided all the people are of one mind in willing what is good and doing it.

Have you reached any conclusions about anything you might wish to change as a result of thinking on the Lord’s revelations?

Prayer In your own words offer up to the Lord whatever it is you wish to change, asking Him to give you the qualities needed to cooperate as He works on the inside.

28th January 2018 A Clean up Job! Psalm 51:2 & 7

Read Psalm 51 and Matthew 23:25-28

When a situation or event causes us to stop and think, one of the things we do is diagnose or examine what's going on, and look for symptoms. That's true of our bodily health, and our mental health, too. Doctors and medics are trained to search for symptoms, to see patterns and connections, and then to draw conclusions about what the condition might be. A contemporary development is a recognition of the need to look at the whole person, and not only at the surface symptoms, which may be concealing deeper problems.

We can look at society and communities and families in this way. Social workers, counsellors and pastoral workers are trained to look for symptoms and link them together to form a picture, so that actions might be taken to remedy dysfunctional behaviour. These behavioural patterns reveal something about society and people's attitudes and values.

In this country, our general tendency to be untidy and careless about litter, and for vandalism and graffiti to be so common and wanton, must be symptomatic of something. The underlying causes

obviously need healing and cleaning up - literally so far as our surroundings are concerned. But more importantly, it's quite obvious that in this instance, as in many others we can identify, values and attitudes have become distorted, and only a purifying process can bring about change.

When we reflect and talk about self-centred impulses, the unanswered question is usually, Why? Where does it come from? The short, direct answer drawn from the Lord's revelations is that all negativity comes from communities of people in the hellish part of the spiritual world. They are human beings like us, who have freely committed themselves to lifestyles which have rejected love and affection and compassion, and all the other good qualities we know, in favour of self-centred, materialistic values. It is their desire to attract you and me, and so we feel their influence in the form of malevolent, hateful, destructive urges and feelings and lusts.

Part of the growing up process, nurtured by loving and wise adults, is to learn to favour and cultivate the good and the positive, and to discover that these are what truly give us delight and satisfaction. But it is in adult life that we begin to discover how strong the influence of hellish communities is. Feelings and urges we don't really like or want continue to affect us for years and years. Sometimes we resist and say no. Sometimes we yield and give in. It's a lifelong process.

One of the most significant discoveries we make is that, in the end, **we** don't actually have the power to make the changes. That power is at the same time outside us and within us. Yes, we have to want it, we have to ask for it - sometimes desperately. Yes, we have to feel that it is **we** who are doing the resisting and fighting the battles. But, eventually, we come to realise that it's really the Lord our God who is doing the cleaning for us; He is the one who is purifying us from what drags us down and destroys relationships and true values. He is the only source of power and strength who can rid us of evil influences and replace them with heavenly love.

Jesus' metaphor of a cup which is clean on the outside but filthy on the inside is just marvellous. It tells us what we really know already. He doesn't condemn us for our condition but yearns passionately for us to let him help us. He wants us to be clean inside **and** out, to be whiter than snow. He **wants** us to experience his joy and gladness. **Our** part is to entreat him to create in us a pure heart, and to renew a steadfast spirit within us, to restore to us the joy of his salvation. For all of that we need a willing spirit to sustain us as we undergo change and inner growth.

Read Psalm 51.1 and meditate on our Lord's loving mercy.

Prayer *Heavenly Father, at the end of the first month of this new year, be with me as I struggle to hold to my commitment to live my life as You would wish me to. Quieten the noise in my head as I deal with earthly responsibilities and demands, so that Your still small voice is not drowned out. Strengthen my resolve, Lord, and renew a right spirit within me, so that the joy you want me to experience may become a living and daily reality for me.*

The Lord's Prayer.

Blessing. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.