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Lent 1C

Sermon notes

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"All things new"

'Go and say to this people: Hear and hear, but do not understand; see and see, but do not perceive.' Is. 6, 9. *'He makes all things new'.* Rev. 21, 5 *'If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come.'* 2 Cor. 5,17

Christianity is under suspicion, thanks to the exploits of abusive priests, crooked evangelists, manipulative sects and the attacks of militant atheists who regard faith in Christ as a hindrance to progress, and an insult to intelligence. .

But the strongest argument against Christianity is that it promises too much. It fails to deliver. In two thousand years it has not made humanity more human. A famous critic of the church said "Christians should look more redeemed." A communist said "If I believed what you Christians say you believe, I would crawl over broken glass to tell other people."

Every Sunday our music and our words have one theme: the three Rs of Christian belief : renewal, restoration and resurrection. But it seems to make no difference, to us or the world at large. We don't look more redeemed than others. We have the same anxieties, moods, illnesses and cares. We are tempted like everyone else. We are seduced by the follies of the age, by propaganda, and the fear of political incorrectness - like everyone else.

There is a credibility gap between what is said in church, and what is done out of church. This is the dilemma that faced Isaiah. He received a message that he knew he could not communicate to the people. They would hear but not understand, see but not perceive. Jesus quotes those words (from two Sundays ago) to his disciples.

But Paul is always positive. He says Christians do make a difference. He told the Corinthians they were "the fragrance of Christ" in the world. They were "a letter from Christ ... written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on stone tablets but on human hearts..." [2 Cor. 3 & 3]

Paul says that if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation.

He is not talking about private spiritual experience, religious conversion or attending

church. Not a different temperament or personality, and not commitment to the kind of Christianity popularised by Dr. Macnab, who says – "I will accept some parts of the Bible but not other parts..." That isn't faith in Christ, it's what children do when they prefer sweets to meat and vegetables.

The greatest figure in early Christianity was St. Augustine, who dominated Christian thought from the 4th century onwards. In one of his books he says: "*If one man merely stares at the world, while another not only sees but questions it, the world . . . is dumb to one and speaks to the other*". Augustine echoes Paul. Right seeing enables the world, and everything in it, to speak the truth to us.

Right seeing is as close to the truth as is humanly possible. Sometimes we see that the world is going to ruin. Sometimes we see the world in a more positive light. It depends on where we stand. Two people see the same football match, or hear a debate between two politicians, and come to different conclusions - because they stand in different places.

Mostly our differences don't matter. But sometimes they do, and whole societies can misinterpret what is seen with consequences that last for generations.

* Everybody knows that China is moving towards world dominance. We worry that China will outstrip the US and overshadow the western nations. But of course the Western nations have already weakened themselves, by losing the political authority that justified them. There is a sickness at the heart of western civilisation that is moral and spiritual rather than economic and military.

So what do the competing claims of east and west signify? They also point to new creation?

The Bible sees world events as a battle between truth and the lie; between reality and fiction. This is confirmed today by the fact that there is no dependable source of certainty, no final arbiter in a world where every decision may be appealed, no judgment is final and all transgressions may be explained away.

New creation is more than private spiritual progress. New creation is a public reality penetrating every aspect of life : intellectual, technological, scientific, artistic and so on. The three Rs of Christian learning (renewal, restoration, resurrection) belong to the only

world in which the Word became flesh; the world as the only place in which it is possible to have faith, namely the secular world.

Not the church but the secular world is the locus of new creation because Christ became man not just for his followers but for all mankind. This is why, even though not every new thing is beneficial, mankind keeps its head above water. Despite ever more disastrous techniques of murder and destruction, technology manages to transform the world for good, as our own lifetimes bear witness. No human endeavour lies outside the orbit of providence. And new creation, the gift of providence, appears in such miracles as medical progress and the end of famine. On the voyage of humanity, despite every attempt by the passengers to sink the ship by blunders, transgressions, tragedies and follies, new creation appears unseen, unheard of, unexpectedly.

One of the mysteries of history is that evil and chaos are everywhere but do not prevail. If they did, we would not be free – as we are – to choose between life or death, goodness or evil. But it is given to every man and woman to choose life and goodness. Why? The power of newness inspires courage and replaces uncertainty and fear with certainty. That is the testimony of Paul and the whole New Testament. New creation is the grand symphonic theme of the Bible, especially of its final book, where the holy city appears and God himself dwells with mankind, and declares that all things are being made new.

Our tragedy is not to see it; to think the old world cannot change. Our tragedy is to see only a world trapped in the evils described in the Old Testament myths, and committed throughout history by tyrants, monsters in human form, official lies and commonplace wickedness.

The work of Christians is to watch for signs of new creation, which appear in new models of manhood and womanhood, new ways of thinking and feeling, new answers to the hurts and worries and opportunities and gifts of life ... Newness that flows from the same power that raised a crucified man and released the energy to revive, again and again, the corpse of history. May I sum up with a simple truth, to be tested against your daily intake of news and entertainment. It is this. Faith in Christ lets us see what is not visible, and hope in Christ allows us never to be overwhelmed when invisible realities suddenly break upon us and threaten to destroy the world as we know it.

If two people can observe the same thing but reach different conclusions about what they see, it is because one of them has received the gift of

faith-ful vision, and the other lacks it. That gift does not fall from the sky. It comes only to learners in the school of Christ. They see what needs to be seen, if they know how. Such seeing requires no special intelligence or higher education.

It comes only through trust and obedience (as the old hymn puts it); it comes by fixing our eyes *from time to time* and as a lifelong habit on the Bible, as the record of the Word who became flesh; on the tradition, through creed and hymns, that keeps the record alive; and on the Eucharist, by which we are present to the Lord. Sunday after Sunday the liturgy clears our minds of the smog of illusion that surrounds us all in our media dominated society.

Here we see what needs to be seen. This is a gift, to be received in humility and gratefully, It is the key to confidence. It is freedom from the dead weight of guilt. And it is the joy that comes from being afraid of nothing. All because in Christ there is a new creation.