

Sunday 7th February
Colossians 1:15-20
John 1:1-14

Like many of us I try to get out each day for a walk to get some exercise. But the restrictions of the lockdown mean that walks have to be fairly local affairs. Kate and I have a couple of regular 'routes' around the streets that surround Widney Lane. Occasionally, when we have more time and the weather is with us, we venture a little further, but always starting from home.

And also like many people, I would guess, I miss getting out into the hills. I miss the views; I miss the challenges of longer walks and more rugged terrain; I miss seeing and being part of the beauty of God's creation.

Ask a Christian where they feel closest to God, and the chances are that they would respond that they feel closest when looking at or being out in the natural world. The majesty of the mountains, the beauty of the trees, the wonder and variety of creation. Which is interesting, because at the heart of the Christian faith is the teaching – and we can see it in the readings today from Colossians and John's gospel – that it is Jesus who reveals God to us. "He is the image of the invisible God" says Paul in the letter. Jesus himself says to Philip – "whoever has seen me has seen the Father." And that makes me wonder if we are wrong in looking for God in the natural world. I think today's readings have much to teach us on this.

Last week we celebrated the Presentation of Christ in the Temple – Candlemas – and we made the point that it marked the time when our focus shifted from the Christmas story towards the events of Holy Week and Easter. Which might make it seem a bit odd that this week we have as our gospel a reading which we would probably link more with Christmas. But the reason for having it today is, I think, to tell us that we need a bigger vision of Jesus and his importance in our lives and the life of the world. He is more than the baby, more than the teacher and miracle worker, he is the image of the invisible God.

What is God like? is a question people have asked through the ages - if only I could see God. In Jesus we have the answer. Look at me, he says, and you will see God. In the power and the compassion; in the love and the concern; in the wisdom and the wonder and in the self sacrifice and suffering of the cross – you will see God.

It's not an option to think of Jesus just as a good and wise moral teacher; it's not an option to think of him just as a miracle worker; it's not even enough to think of him just as someone who made the ultimate sacrifice. He is God himself; the fullness of God is in him. To follow Jesus is to follow God. Jesus is not an optional extra – he is the meaning and purpose of life itself.

But the readings tell us two more things about Jesus – two things which will affect all we are and all we believe.

The first is that the Jesus is the example of true humanity. It's not only that we look at him and see what God is like; we also look at him and see what humanity could be like. In the creation stories in Genesis we read that men and women were created in the image of God. We know that through the whole of human history that image has been marred and minimised so that it is hard to detect now. But in Jesus we can see the crystal clear image of what humans were made to be. He is the link between humanity and God – fully and perfect human; fully and perfect God.

And as our example of what human life could be, we seek to model our lives on him. As disciples or apprentices of Jesus we watch him, learn from him and put what we learn into practice. We know we will never be able to perfect as he is, but we trust that through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit we can be made more and more like him.

The other thing that these passages say about Jesus links together what we were saying about finding God in creation with the truth that God is fully revealed in Jesus. Both passages tell us the same thing - that the whole of creation was created through Jesus. That's a truly mind blowing statement – even more so when we consider that Colossians was probably written little more than 20 years after Jesus's death. It means that Jesus – the Word of God, the Son of God – did not come into being in the Bethlehem stable. He has always been. He was “in the beginning”. He is “the firstborn of all creation”. He will be for evermore.

And so it's not surprising that we see God in creation, because creation itself was made through Jesus. If Jesus is the true image of God, everything that was created through him carries something of that image. When we look at the world around us we can see something of God and that draws us into God's presence.

But Colossians says yet more. It talks about reconciliation. It's true that when we look at the world around us we see the goodness and creativity of God. But we can also see pain and suffering and sorrow; we can see things that fall short of God's ideal. We see the destruction caused by what we know as “natural disasters”; we know all too well in these difficult times the suffering caused by viruses and illness; we see countless examples of creation not being good as it was originally.

In the letter to the Colossians (and elsewhere in his writings) Paul talks of the death of Jesus on the cross not only being to reconcile human beings to God, but also to reconcile the whole of creation. That in Jesus creation will once more be restored to what it was intended to be, just as we humans will be restored to what we were intended to be.

All this might seem like fairly deep theology. All this might seem to have little relevance to how we live our daily lives, particularly in times like these. But that would be wrong.

The things we have been thinking about today are at the very heart of life. The truths we have been pondering about Jesus are central to our faith. As Christians we don't just believe in a God who created the world then left us to it – we believe in a God who loved the world he created so much that he came to live amongst us in Jesus, to show us the truth of the divine, to show us the full potential of humanity and to restore us and the whole of creation

to him. A God who in Jesus knows what life can be like because he has lived it. A God who in Jesus knows what pain and death is like because he has suffered it. A God who in Jesus welcomes us back to him and gives us eternal life.

The test of our faith then is not whether we believe in God, or whether we see God in the natural world, but is whether we are those who commit ourselves to following Jesus, to being his disciples and growing in knowledge and love of him day by day.