

Downing Place United Reformed Church, Cambridge

Sunday 22nd December 2019 Advent IV

11.00am Carol Service

Sermon: *‘The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.’* Isaiah 9.7:

Human beings can be passionate about all sorts of things. I think of Australia, where ‘catastrophic’ blazes stir fire-fighters to sacrificial action, and others to campaign for sufficient action to arrest climate change. When seeking to appoint people to leadership rôles, like the Governor of the Bank of England, we look for those who have enthusiasm to complement their experience. And, in the days before a general election, many are focussed upon what might be done to re-shape the world; party policies offer us different-coloured options, and they are ardently urged upon us. In short, when things matter to us, we give ourselves wholeheartedly to them.

The Christmas story doesn’t want to dissuade or distract us from our noble intentions. Indeed, many of a year’s good works are inspired by it, and happen in November and December – *Crisis, Children in Need*, and innumerable charitable collections. But nor do the readings and songs at a Carol Service suggest our good works are the complete answer to the world’s imperfections. They are not even the beginning of an answer. As we read of what occurred ‘once in royal David’s city’, we are being drawn into a narrative of God’s work that all things should be reconciled. You and I benefit from God’s work, we proclaim it and we even join in with it, but we neither initiate nor complete it.

An old word for passionate commitment is ‘zeal’. The King James Bible teaches that ‘zeal’ characterises the God who sends the ‘child ... born for us, [the] ... son given to us’: ‘the zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.’ Just before the first Christmas of World War One, the renowned Baptist, C. H. Spurgeon, preached a phenomenally long sermon on God’s zeal; ¹ one sentence alone has 189 words, and 18 commas. It may even be that my maternal grandfather heard it because he was a Sunday School teacher there at about that time. Spurgeon muses that God may well have been *pleased* at creation because it was good – formed out of God’s *wisdom* and *power* - but Scripture doesn’t tell us God created with ‘zeal’. Spurgeon also ponders Biblical accounts of providence – rescue acts like the parting of the Red Sea. Spurgeon doesn’t find zeal there either – ‘just the tender breath of his mouth and it is all done.’ No, for Spurgeon, and maybe for Isaiah, too, the singular thing to which God brings ‘zeal’ is the desire so to reconcile the apple-eating world to God, that we might become what St John’s Prologue calls ‘children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.’ (Jn 1.13) *That* is what the zeal of the Lord of hosts will do.

And this gives us hope, precisely because it’s neither first nor finally about us. We can fool ourselves that everything to which we aspire in our personal lives, and in society, emerges from our good intentions, sophisticated political philosophy, or benevolent personality, but it’s from the God, who, out of zeal for the renewal and reconciliation of all things, comes to us in Jesus Christ. Jesus is God meeting us where we are – even in sin’s darkest places – and making us God’s children. It’s when we ‘flower into being’ as children of God that we bear the fruit of zealous good works.

It maybe that you are more captivated by the sense that it was ‘love [which] came down at Christmas’, and that this archaic talk of zeal doesn’t quite replace love for you as the Christmas watchword. I understand, but interestingly, two hundred years before the King James Version, the Bible’s Wycliffe translation renders the same verse about the zeal of the Lord of hosts as ‘the *fervent love* of the Lord of hosts.’ You see, the love that came down at Christmas, was not just to make us feel warm inside, though it might, not just to encourage us to be loving, though it should, but to restore humanity – and that includes you and me – to a relationship with the one ‘in whom we live and move and have our being’. And when that happens, as children of God we are so re-fashioned into God’s image that charity is not an optional extra but an irresistible imperative, hospitality is not a disciplined duty but a spontaneous delight, fire-fighting not a career choice but an altruistic vocation, the demand for justice not the zealot’s obsession but the disciple’s default.

So, when a carol service reminds us of how the zeal, the fervent love, of the Lord does God’s saving work, let it send us out into the world passionately to live as children of God. I sat beside one of you in a carol service recently and as we heard Isaiah’s claim, ‘The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this’ they ejaculated, ‘How we need that zeal!’ How indeed! And such is the path to a happy Christmas.

N. P. Uden, 22nd December 2019

¹ Spurgeon, C. H. *The Zeal of the Lord* – A sermon on Isaiah 9.7 from 12th November 1914