



**Sermon preached by Revd Chris Baker on 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2021**

**Readings:** Ephesians 6.10-20; 1 Kings 8.22-30; John 6.56-69

*High King of Heaven, after victory won, may I reach heaven's joys, O bright heaven's sun!* So we sang at the end of our second hymn. 'May I reach...' implies a journey.

Have you noticed just how many programmes there have been on television during this lockdown that have involved travel. It's as if, knowing that we couldn't travel, the programme managers decided to take us on lots of journeys. There's Michael Portillo - in his colourful jackets taking us on train journeys. There's Susan Calman touring around in her trusty campervan. There's the Antiques Road Trip pottering about the country and even Craig Revel-Horwood and Bruno Tonioli, an unlikely pairing driving around the country. And now Paul Merton and his wife Suki Webster have got in on the act. Most of these journeys have no particular end in view - they are simply travelling around to enjoy the countryside, admire the architecture, to learn some history or to meet some interesting people. But perhaps they illustrate that we have itchy feet, restless feet, which may be symptoms of restless hearts. It was St Augustine of Hippo who said, '**You have made us for yourself O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you. Great are you, O God, and exceedingly worthy of praise, your power is immense and your wisdom beyond reckoning.**' We are restless and so we travel, travel with a purpose, travel with an aim, travel to the living God.

It seems to me there are stages in this travel. We may start with an awareness of the sheer wonder of the world around us. Over these past months people have been out exploring nature, enjoying nature. With fewer planes flying overhead people have been able to listen to the birds. They, we, have looked at the sheer beauty of nature, of plants, of magnificent trees, spreading out in all their grandeur. Some here have shared their photos of scenes of beauty on Facebook. Or perhaps it's the night sky which enthral us. You remember how it certainly enthralled the psalmist:

*O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!*

*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? (Psalm 8)*

And as we explore how all this came to be so our wonderment simply grows. Just listen to this passage in which John Polkinghorne, in his book *Science and Christian Belief*, describes the process of creation. "**Within the stars nuclear reactions started up again, as the contractive force of gravity heated up the stellar cores beyond their ignition temperature. Hydrogen was burned to become helium, and when that fuel was exhausted a delicate chain of nuclear reactions started up, which generated further energy and the heavier elements up to iron. The elemental building blocks of life were beginning to be made. Every atom of carbon in every living being was once inside a star, from whose dead ashes we have all arisen.**' From whose dead ashes we have all arisen. Isn't that a lovely choice of words. Isn't this just fantastic! It's so exciting.

And you remember how Joseph Addison put it in his hymn about the planets spinning in space:

In reason's ear, they all rejoice, and utter forth a glorious voice,

Forever singing, as they shine, "The hand that made us is divine."

The glory of God our creator!

But that's only the first step on our journey. Wonderment at the Creator is not enough. Millions of people can believe in a Creator God but you don't have to be a Christian to believe that. The people

of Israel dared to believe that God had called them into a special relationship. He had heard their cries of distress in Egypt and had acted to bring them to freedom in a promised land. And within their community God was represented by the Ark of the Covenant - a box holding the two tablets of the Law which Moses had placed there at Mount Horeb. For many years it had been housed in a tent. David, their second king, had wanted to build a more permanent residence for it, a glorious Temple, God had said 'No'. That privilege was granted to his son Solomon, and we heard earlier a fragment from the opening ceremony. Can we not imagine Solomon standing there before the altar, wearing his tallith, lifting his arms in prayer:

**'O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart.'**

So over the years the people of Israel had come to recognise the fact that God was not just a creator who set things in motion and then sat back to watch; he is God who loves his creation, who loves his people, who is involved in what is going on, who is in ultimate command. And this God is a God who keeps his word. He had made promises to David and now Solomon is reminding God of that fact, though perhaps, in the excitement of the moment, forgetting that the promises were conditional on the people remembering to walk with God. In the excitement of bringing the Ark into this glorious new Temple the people were actually in a moment of danger. It was said that when the Ark of the Covenant had been placed in the Temple and the priests had withdrawn, the central sanctuary was filled with the glory of God. So it was easy to believe that this was their God and he now resided in this house which they had built. He was, not to put too fine upon it, in their control. If they believed that, then they were in for a disappointment. because their concept of God was far too small.

To his credit Solomon knew this. **'Will God indeed dwell on earth? ' he asks. ' Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!'** And while the Jerusalem Temple was for centuries a focal point for the faith of the people of Israel, in time the Ark with its precious tablets was lost, no-one is sure how or when. But at the heart of the Temple there was a empty void. So we have not yet arrived at our destination.

In time there came one who was to bring all people into a new relationship with God. Jesus emerged as a total surprise. He grew up in poverty in a little village which didn't even register in the list of Galilean villages compiled by the historian Josephus, nor in the Talmud. But when he eventually began his ministry the effect was startling. Very soon he was a talking point and news about him spread. He caused alarm bells to ring in the corridors of power in Jerusalem because his teaching was fresh. Much of what he taught wasn't new but he spoke as if he had it first hand from God rather than from ancient writings. He talked to people about real life situations, he told them stories which they could relate to, stories which told them about the nature of God and the sort of community he -wanted. And he had power - power that he used to bring help and healing to those in need. Many people flooded to him but then his teaching became hard; hard to understand and hard to follow. He spoke about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, words which not only caused consternation then but which have been debated by theologians throughout history and are still the cause of division among Christian people today. So I offer one interpretation.

John does not include an account of the Last Supper in his version of the gospel but Joachim Jeremias believes that the words we heard earlier from John's gospel are actually part of a eucharistic homily - they are John's version of how Jesus interpreted the bread and wine in the Upper Room. Jesus used the terms flesh and blood which in Jewish thinking refer to sacrificial giving, so perhaps we are to understand them in this way. Through his sacrificial giving Jesus opens the way to the Father. Those who identify with Christ's self sacrifice, taking the bread and wine as a metaphor of Jesus himself, find the way to the divine. Jesus constantly emphasises the he and the Father are One. Now he is saying that in sharing in his life and sacrifice through the Spirit we become one with him and live with his life. We become co-heirs of the kingdom and the great God becomes our father in a new and intimate way. It was difficult. It is difficult and many parted ways with Jesus at this point. Their journey was over.

But as for the Twelve? Jesus asked them, 'Will you also go away?' Peter, always the spokesman, answered, '**Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe AND KNOW that you are the Holy One of God.**' He had surely arrived.

We are all on a journey, travelling at different speeds, at different points on the road. I know I have a long way to go but it's exciting! Walking by the grace of God, marvelling at creation, experiencing the divine love, seeking forgiveness and renewal, exploring the faith. It's a grand adventure. May the Holy Spirit bring us all to unity in God.

High king of Heaven, after victory won,

May I reach heaven's joys, O bright heaven's sun!

Heart of my own heart, whatever befall,

Be thou my Vision, O Ruler of all.