

SERMON: Sunday – 2 January 2022 – Rev Alistair Cowper

New Year Hope - In Memory of Desmond Tutu

Ephesians 1:3-14

John 1:10-18

The Gospels: A New Translation by Sarah Ruden, 2021.

He came into what belonged to him, but the people who belonged to him didn't accept him for themselves. But to all those who accepted him, he gave the power to become, to be born, children of god, if they trusted in his name. These are the people who have been engendered not in a blood relationship, and not from what the body wants, and not from what a husband wants, but from god.

And the spoken word, the true account, became flesh and blood, and built a shelter and sojourned among us, and we gazed on his splendour, a splendour that a father's only son has, full of joyful favour and truth. Iōannēs testified about him and shouted these words: "This was the one I spoke of: 'The one coming after me arose before me, because he was first, at the head of me.' Out of what fills him to the full, we have all been given a share, joyful favour in exchange for joyful favour. The law was given through Mōūsēs, but favour and truth came into being through Iēsous, the Anointed One. No one has ever seen god. But the only-born god, who is in the father's lap, made the father understandable."

How could God come into the world God created and the world not recognise him, know him, accept him?

John's Gospel assertion that the world did not know him hits us hard. But what is it that blinds the world to accept God? I suppose we know the answer to that to be sin. It is sinfulness that disrupts people's vision.

The great anti-apartheid, Noble Peace Prize winning Archbishop Desmond Tutu died last Sunday. His life was a great example of what it looks like to follow Jesus in this life.

Here's a couple of things he famously said,

(SLIDE)

“When the missionaries came to Africa they had the Bible and we had the land. They said "Let us pray." We closed our eyes. When we opened them we had the Bible and they had the land.”

— Desmond Tutu

A quote which helps explain how greed and ambition can blind us to God's way and inhibit the coming of God's kingdom on earth as in heaven.

(SLIDE)

“Religion is like a knife: you can either use it to cut bread, or stick in someone's back.”

— Desmond Tutu

Jesus came into the world to break bread with the world, to feed the hungry. Desmond Tutu tried to do that too.

Desmond Tutu was good at proclaiming the good news of rebirth in God, of becoming children born of God, something that John connects with the Divine Word becoming human and dwelling in Creation.

1:14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

1:12 (And) to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,

In other words people now have the power to know themselves as beloved children of God, filled with the Spirit of God, to live in the way of God.

As Tutu said,

(SLIDE)

“We are made for goodness. We are made for love. We are made for friendliness. We are made for togetherness. We are made for all of the beautiful things that you and I know. We are made to tell the world that there are no outsiders. All are welcome: black, white, red, yellow, rich, poor, educated, not educated, male, female, gay, straight, all, all, all. We all belong to this family, this human family, God's family.”

— Desmond Tutu

Something that Paul writing to the Ephesians with the words,

9 God has now revealed to us his mysterious will regarding Christ—which is to fulfil his own good plan. 10 And this is the plan: At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ—everything in heaven and on earth.

Paul declares in that letter that those who do accept God have been blessed with every spiritual blessing, united with Christ, loved by God, their sins forgiven, filled with grace upon grace, showered with kindness, wisdom and understanding, with a hope of glory ahead.

Now that's good news to hear at the start of a new year. That there is the certain hope of glory ahead. I wonder what difference knowing that might make to us as we wake every morning and remind ourselves of that hope.

We are never alone. God is with us. And God's Spirit is the guarantee, the foretaste of that future glory, which strengthens us day by day.

Jesus has made God understandable to us, shown us what God is like.

When John speaks of the Word becoming human and making God known he uses the Greek verb (ex-egesato) which means to lead, to show the way, or to unfold something great.

I like the idea of unfolding because it suggests a continuing, ongoing process. Something began in Christ and now Christ continues to be unfolded in and through ordinary people like Desmond Tutu or even you and me.

Desmond Tutu, united with Christ, praised and glorified God with his own life. He became a part of that great unfolding of Christ. How might we use our lives in Christ to praise and glorify God and be part of that same unfolding in this new year?

I finish with a final quote in memory of Desmond Tutu, a quote that describes how he attempted to use his life to tackle the root causes of the evils of apartheid and poverty.

(SLIDE)

“There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they’re falling in.”

— Desmond Tutu

As we seek the kingdom of God may we too always aim to get to the heart of the matter.

In Jesus’ name.

Amen.