

SERMON: 02 June 2019 – Rev Alistair Cowper

“Religious Reform and the Revelation of Christ” (2 Chronicles 15:1-15 and John 17:20-26)

King Asa of Judah was the great great grandson of King David of Israel. History tells us he was a good king and there was peace for most of the 41 years he reigned in Jerusalem.

However, like every other king before him, he wasn't perfect. Even the Book of Chronicles, which is sympathetic to the Kings of Judah and Israel, tells us that Asa didn't get rid of all the pagan shrines in the land, he left some untouched, he tolerated practises that weren't good, and when things were going well for him, he sought help from a powerful neighbouring king instead of seeking God's help. He also probably died from a terrible foot disease which again he refused to seek God's help for preferring to trust only in medical help.

And remember the Bible tells us it was never God's idea that God's people should be ruled by an earthly king (1 Samuel 8; Hosea 13:11).

When the people of (the then united) nation of Israel saw that the nations around them were led by kings they decided that's what they needed too. God tells the prophet and judge Samuel that it's not Samuel they are rejecting as their judge at the time, rather it's their God they are rejecting since they no longer want the God who delivered them from slavery to be their king.

In 2 Chronicles we have this story about King Asa introducing religious reform in Judah, the southern part of the now divided nation of Israel.

The story starts with a hopeful word from God, when the Spirit of God comes upon the prophet Azariah.

“Listen to me, Asa!” he shouted. “Listen, all you people of Judah and Benjamin! The Lord will stay with you as long as you stay with him! Whenever you seek him, you will find him. But if you abandon him, he will abandon you. **3** For a long time Israel was without the true God, without a priest to teach them, and without the Law to instruct them. **4** But whenever they were in trouble and turned to the Lord, the God of Israel, and sought him out, they found him.

5 “During those dark times, it was not safe to travel. Problems troubled the people of every land. **6** Nation fought against nation, and city against city, for

God was troubling them with every kind of problem. **7** But as for you, be strong and courageous, for your work will be rewarded.”

So when Asa gets the message he starts to make changes for the better. He gets rid of all the detestable idols and he repairs the altar of the Lord. In other words, until this word from God came to Asa and the people of Judah and Benjamin, detestable idols had been tolerated, maybe even encouraged, and the place of worship of God was in disrepair. No wonder they were having problems.

Now to me these reforms sound good, essential even. People have to get rid of harmful practises and find spaces in their lives to worship God, to give God his worth. Because people are made for worship and life works best when we are worshipping God, when we are in a healthy relationship which acknowledges what God is worth, the God who is revealed in creation, throughout history and in the person of Jesus the Anointed One.

Now what form that worship takes will vary from place to place and person to person.

In Asa’s time they understood that worship meant sacrifice. And so we read that they respond to this word from God by sacrificing 700 cattle and 7,000 sheep and goats from the plunder they’d taken from raiding their neighbours. That doesn’t sound like it was all that costly to them since it was their neighbouring nations’ cattle they sacrificed rather than their own, which presumably they had.

Sounds to me like they weren’t familiar with those words of King David about refusing to offer anything to God which had cost him nothing (2 Samuel 24:24).

And then we read that Asa had the people enter a covenant to seek the Lord, with all their heart and soul. That sounds good. But then the next verse tells us that anyone who refused to seek the Lord, would be put to death, whether young or old, man or woman.

We might read this and understand that this is what God is asking his people to do. Especially when we read on and find that all the people were happy with this covenant and entered into it with all their heart, earnestly seeking God and finding him. And the Lord gave them rest from their enemies on every side.

That being the outcome, we might read the steps leading up to that as being what God was asking. This is why so many people read the Old Testament and only see a God who condones, and even encourages, violence.

But there's often a big difference between what God says and what people hear or understand.

The sacrifices and the death threats didn't come from God. They came from people's misunderstanding of what God was saying or if not misunderstanding, they were at least adding something on to what God was asking of them.

God doesn't ask people to deal harshly with others. God's way is love. The way of Christ is grace and acceptance not judgement and hatred.

Jesus is the supreme model of unconditional love. Never once did he issue a death threat. Nor did he sacrifice a lamb or a goat or even a pigeon. Instead he offered himself as the way to greatness and oneness with God.

His prayer for us in John 17 is a prayer for that oneness to be a reality for us. It shows that God's desire for the church and indeed for all people is a desire for unity - that they will be one (17:21).

And that oneness doesn't just mean that we agree to agree with each other. In fact it's not that at all. Unity doesn't mean we'll always agree with each other.

We know that from 2,000 years of church history. If Christians always agreed on their interpretation of God and what God says then there would be no more than one denomination. But history has shown us that the church has not always agreed on the interpretation of the Bible. Even today, there might be as many different interpretations of a Bible verse as there are people reading or hearing it. But that doesn't mean we can't be one.

Until we are each made perfect we will still interpret the Bible differently from each other. What we need is the the Spirit to be our Guide into all truth. What matters always is to surrender our heart and mind to the Spirit's counsel.

We need the Helper whom Jesus promised his disciples and who has been poured out on the church at Pentecost.

Come Holy Spirit, even now, we need you, to be our Guide, to keep us from misinterpretation, misunderstanding and disunity.

Oneness is more than agreeing with each other. It's the need to be one with Christ, one in Christ, as Jesus was one with the Father, as Jesus was in the Father, and the Father was in Jesus. It's that mutual indwelling that matters - me in God and God in me; us in God and God in us.

When Jesus prays, I have given them the glory you gave me (17:22), he's saying that this oneness is given, through Jesus, to those who seek to follow Jesus.

In the Greek, to be given the glory here is in the perfect tense, suggesting that this is an ongoing activity of Jesus, to continually pour out the glory, the glory that tends to oneness with God and with all living beings.

Jesus is constantly giving out the glory. It is pouring out into believing hearts. It's a constant flow of grace and blessing. And we're invited to get into the flow and let the blessing of oneness flow through us.

We can say to ourselves and to one another - I am one with Christ. I am one with God. I am one with you, my brother, my sister. We are all one in Christ.

This flow is a continual revealing of Christ to us. Meaning we grow in our understanding of who God is and how God works. Without that necessary growth, we will misinterpret, misunderstand and be disunited.

But in this prayer of Jesus, he promises to keep on revealing God to us so that God's love would be fully in us, that we may be perfected into one.

Let us pray,
Loving Father, thank you that you have made us one with you and with each other. As we seek to witness the love of Christ, bring us to a more perfect state of unity in heart and mind, so that we might see your kingdom come in ever greater glory in Kirknewton and East Calder and in all of life. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.