

Advent 2 2018 Sermon

Phil 1:3-11 (page 1178); Luke 3:1-6 (page 1029)

Stephen Hawkins, the astro-physicist and author of 'A brief history of time' was apparently a betting man – he had a lot of framed bets hanging in his home. He did not believe time-travel was possible, but when asked why he had never bet on time-travel he replied, speaking of the other person in any wager "Because I won't know when he came from."

If I remember rightly (its quite a while since I gave his book away), Stephen Hawkins concluded a Brief History of Time expressing his ambivalence about embracing creation and a creator in favour of blind chance. In doing so he quoted Albert Einstein's famous words "God doesn't play dice, but if he did, he'd win!"

*By contrast, **Luke was** in absolutely no doubt from when – and where – John the Baptist came. He locates John's ministry very precisely in time "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar – when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea & Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene – during the High Priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas..."*

In his introduction, Luke tells us that "Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning it seemed good to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught."

Luke was a Greek doctor, so a diligent student and without an inbuilt bias towards Hebrew sensitivities and politics. He wants us (along with Theophilus) to be confident of what we have been taught. Therefore he grounds the life of Jesus in real history.

Not only are his time-line and identification of the key players precise, but so is his geographic placement. "The word of God came to John, son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."

One of the main reasons we can be so confident of the Gospel accounts is the accuracy of the detail of times and places, and also of people's names. The names we give our children vary from region to region of the country and generation to

generation. The Times even gives an annual table to help track these movements. The personal names given in the New Testament scriptures are a precise statistical fit to the given names for the regions and dates in which those people are located. Without corroborative eye-witness accounts it would have been highly unlikely for any fiction writer to create such a statistical match.

But Luke wanted to do more than locate John the Baptist – and therefore Jesus – in the human history of Space-Time. *Where Stephen-Hawkins doubted a Spiritual Realm, or the Will of God giving trajectory to human history – Luke was in no doubt.* He located John's Ministry squarely in God's game-plan for human salvation. He did this by quoting a prophecy which Isaiah declared some 700 years earlier, and identifying John the Baptist as the fulfilment of this prophecy "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord ... and all people will see God's salvation.'"

Luke wanted us to be confident that human history is not merely a collection of arbitrary chances leading nowhere; but is on a trajectory leading to God's salvation of all mankind. Today, we here are on that same trajectory. We have seen God's salvation in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Today we await the fulfilment of another prophecy, another promise that Jesus himself will come again to bring this era of history to a close as prophesied in the Book of Revelation. Revelation brings the Bible to an end with a promise, a response, and a blessing.

The promise: "He who testifies to these things says, 'Yes, I am coming soon.'"

The response: "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus."

The blessing: "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen"

Just as Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled when human history intersected God's trajectory of salvation; we too can be confident that this promise too will also be fulfilled in human history.

In Advent we not only celebrate the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies with the coming of Jesus, but we look forward to the fulfilment of New Testament promises as we anticipate his return.

So how then should we live as we anticipate Jesus' return? What does it mean to be blessed by 'the grace of the Lord Jesus' in the here and now of human history?

Paul answers that question in his letter to the church at Philippi. A Roman city named after the father of Alexander the Great. Philippi had a very sparse Jewish population, and unusually this letter has no references to the Old Testament. It is written to a mostly gentile church – like ours. In it Paul declares “all of you share in God’s grace with me.” He is writing from in prison or under house arrest – most likely in Rome in AD 61 – yet still considers himself blessed by God’s grace.

Paul wanted us to experience God’s grace in our lives. As we try to answer the question of “what does God’s grace look like here and now?” I simply want to pick up on nine characteristic words from Paul’s epistle. These words are all very simple to understand. I’ll place them under three headings: **Attitude**, **Practice**, and **Gift**, and celebrate their **Result** in our lives.

That’s the easy bit! It is up to each one of us to do the hard work - to consider our own lives in the light of these few words used by Paul. Does my life reflect God’s grace – and if not – what am I going to do to put that right? Of course the same applies to me – I too have to reflect on Paul’s words – and it’s not always easy! *There is a temptation to do ourselves down – but grace is there to lift us up! There is also the opposite temptation to pride. I love the quote “I used to be proud, but now I’m perfect!” In Romans 12 Paul urges us to “consider yourselves with sober judgement” – and that would be a wonderful way to prepare for Christ’s coming!*

First then **Attitude**: Paul uses the words: Joy, Confidence, Love, and Affection. These should be the characteristics of every Christian and every Christian fellowship. They are all rooted in our relationship with God through Jesus. It’s impossible to be a true disciple of Jesus, to know His good news, without exuding these attitudes of the heart: Joy, Confidence, Love, and Affection.

Then there is **Practice** – what we do to encourage and express God’s grace in us. Paul’s words are: Thanksgiving and Prayer. These should be so intertwined as to be almost inseparable. I have a friend called Adrian who finds it almost impossible to pray without launching into thanksgiving. It’s a wonderful way to start. Why not try starting and ending each day with a prayer of thanksgiving?

Thirdly is **Gift** – Paul teaches us that we each have been given gifts of the Holy Spirit. Here in particular he mentions Knowledge, Insight and Discernment. The Gifts of the Spirit are to be used for the building up of the Church. They need to be

used, but to use them we have to know which gifts we've been given. Next term I'm proposing to run a short course that helps people discover the gifts and calling that they have. In this way we can all be encouraged to use our gifts for the building up of the fellowship. Perhaps our New Year resolutions might include discovering and using our gifts?

Then there is the **Result**, and what a beautiful result it is that we "may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God." Our lives and our fellowship bring glory to God! That is just mind-blowing!

What we do is not for our own glory, but to the 'glory and praise of God'.

What we do is not in our own strength, but 'comes through Jesus Christ'.

What we do does not have value only in the here and now, but continues to have value even 'for the day of Christ'.

We have so much to celebrate and look forward to during Advent.

So let's allow these nine words to challenge each one of us today:

For which do you want to give thanks?

For which do you want to confess your poverty of response?

For which do you want to seek a renewal of God's grace in your life today?

And those words again – you'll find them in your notice sheet: Joy, confidence, love, affection, thanksgiving, prayer, knowledge, insight, discernment.

This is God's grace at work in us.

This is how we are called to be until He comes again.

This is Advent's call on our lives.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!