

Epiphany II A

Sunday 15 January 2017

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Isaiah 49:1-7

(Psalm 40:1-11)

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

John 1:29-42

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It's the Fifteenth of January, and I'm wondering where half the first month of the New Year has gone already. Schools have started again, people are back at work, the Church has returned to Ordinary Time. But I do think there's still just about enough freshness in the year, enough of a sense of new beginnings, enough hope for new possibilities, that we can appreciate the new beginnings described in the Gospel reading for today.

Jesus has been freshly baptised at the start of his earthly ministry. John the Baptist has seen the fulfilment of the promise made to him about the coming of God's Spirit into the world in a new way through God's Son.

The first disciples have started tentatively to gather around Jesus. They might not know exactly what it is that they are looking for, but they know that Jesus is at the centre of it and that they need to learn to live out of the same space he is living out of. So, they respond to his invitation to come and see.

The Holy Spirit didn't just come down like a dove to show that Jesus was someone special, and then fly off again. The Spirit from Heaven descended and remained on Jesus, and Jesus in turn baptises those who come to him with that same Holy Spirit. They remain with Jesus, through all that lies ahead of them.

Heaven has broken through to Earth. There is reason for confidence and hope. Jesus has given Simon Peter a new name for a new future. The apostle Paul remembers and reminds the Corinthian church of the grace and strength that had been given to them through Christ Jesus.

The Servant from Isaiah declares his own sense of purpose for which he had been prepared while still in the womb. The Psalmist recalls having been placed securely on a rock with a new song of praise to God in his mouth. He had a sense of the incomparable wonders and good purposes of God that were more than he could tell.

Life goes on, though, whether we like it or not. Inevitably, the freshness of a new year wears off with the passing of time, and the year starts to feel a bit stale. Heaven might have joined itself with earth, but all is not yet as it should be. Disappointment is something we have all experienced.

Before too long, John the Baptist will find himself in prison, wondering whether this man, Jesus, for whom he gave up everything, is who he seemed to be, after all. Simon Peter will experience the ordeal of betraying the one who named him, and will weep bitterly.

“Troubles surround me until they are beyond number;” says that same Psalmist from before, “my sins have overtaken me; I cannot see my way ... My heart fails me.” The Servant from Isaiah, he of the sense of being called before birth, has exclaimed, “My toil has been futile, I have exhausted myself for nothing, to no purpose.” He has reason for saying that: he finds himself to be despised and detested for his efforts.

The Corinthian church, with all its gifts and graces, had somehow managed to lose the plot almost completely, to miss the point of most of what Jesus had done in and for them. They had started behaving really badly, betraying much of what being the Church should be about.

Life is hard. Things don't seem to stay in place for long, in us or around us. We have a tendency to disappoint ourselves and others, and to be disappointed by them. Things don't always turn out the way we hope, no matter how good our intentions. Our actual living out of our deepest and best values can be very much less than we might expect of ourselves.

So, I think that Paul's opening words to the Corinthian church are just marvellous. He must and will challenge and correct them with regard to their unacceptable behaviour, but he does something wonderful before that.

Paul reminds them of who they most truly are in Christ ... and he gives thanks for them before calling them back to living out of that truth about themselves. For all the problems that their misuse of their gifting has caused, he nevertheless gives thanks for that gifting before urging them to use it well.

Best of all, though, Paul assures the Corinthians of the faithfulness of God at work in and through them. They, even they, will be strengthened to be blameless on the day when the Lord Jesus Christ will finally be revealed to all. “It is God himself who called you to share in the life of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord;” Paul reminds the Corinthians, “and God keeps faith.”

The Servant from Isaiah must remember that his cause is surely with his Lord, and his reward with his faithful God. The Servant's calling is about more than just his own life. He will be given as a light to the nations, so that the salvation that is from God may reach to the ends of the earth. The life of the Church is always to be about more than just itself.

The Psalmist realizes that the way out of his troubles is not necessarily through more sacrifice, or greater effort. He needs to learn to use the open ear that God has given him. When we listen deeply with the ear of our heart, we hear the Spirit reading the wisdom of God's law that has been written into our heart, and we are surprised again by the delight of once more learning to do God's will.

We do not then hide God's saving help within our heart, but we speak together of God's steadfast love and of God's faithfulness. So, we can reassure one another, with the Psalmist, that, poor and needy as we sometimes are, the Lord will always have us in mind. Amen.