

Sunday 26 October 2008 : The Last Sunday after Trinity/Bible Sunday

A pattern for living

Readings: Col 3:12-17; Matthew 24:30-35

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly;

And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

In an escape from London a couple of weeks ago, I visited the Eden Project in Cornwall – that extraordinary attempt to bring conservation, sustainability and the questions at the heart of our relationship with the world around us, into the visitor attraction market.

The education centre at the project is called the Core. It's a mix of interactive displays and exhibits and spaces where visitors can record their own responses and thoughts. At the heart of the building is a huge granite seed, located in an inner chamber. It's possible to walk around this huge structure and to touch it – in fact there's a band of slightly worn granite at average human height where it's obviously been touched again and again. The seed forms part of an exhibition which focuses on patterns in nature. Indeed the whole building itself mimics what is described as nature's fundamental growth blueprint; a pattern of structures and spirals which when looked at closely can be seen over and over again in tree trunks, pine cones, pineapples, sunflowers. Scientists who've explored these patterns find that they follow something called a Fibonacci sequence – a sequence of numbers where every number is the sum of the previous two. It's named after a 13th century Italian mathematician – you have a sequence on the paper in front of you.

0 1 1 2 3 5 8 13 21 34 55 89 144 233 377

When we look at a sunflower head, we might not see the florets arranged in spirals of 34 and 55, but they are. The arrangement is not random – it starts at the core and is repeated over and over again. I'm not sure who put the mathematics in a pine cone or a sunflower but it's there! The beauty and order of a sunflower touches us whether we are aware of its repeated structure patterns or not. At one level it doesn't matter; but its underlying structure that gives us these things of beauty. It's the repeated pattern that manifests itself in what we experience. It's what's there at the core that defines what is experienced on the outside.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly

Today is Bible Sunday, a day when we recognise the centrality and importance of the word of scripture in defining who we are as a community of faith. Today, like those early Christians at Colossae we reflect on what it means for word of Christ to dwell in us richly, to be a people grounded and soaked in the word of truth made known to us in the words of scripture. Today as our collect reminds us, we reflect on what it means to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest these words and have our lives individually and as a community defined by them. Today we are reminded of our own core patterns and structures; our own Fibonacci sequence defined by the word of God.

Read that passage from Colossians again and it's a bit like looking at a sunflower. You get the underlying pattern:

*Let the word of God dwell in you richly
manifesting itself in what is seen on the outside
As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness,
humility, meekness, and patience.
Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other;
just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.*

A community that has its fundamental blueprint the word of God is recognisable by the compassion, kindness, patience, humility and forgiveness which it shows in its life together.

Now I may be a cynic, but looking at the Anglican communion and particularly the way it carries out its public discussions on the authority of scripture, the words kindness, humility, patience and forgiveness are not the words that spring immediately to mind. So what's gone wrong? Why doesn't the blueprint of the word of God manifest itself in the way we live as a Christian community?

Well I think it's something to do with habits and practice. I don't believe that the words of scripture were ever meant to be used as some moral code book dislocated from the rest of our lives. I don't believe that the authority of scripture lies in using it to condemn and exclude on the basis of our reading of a handful of verses extracted from the context in which they were written. I don't believe that this living word was ever intended to be read in a disconnected present tense.

The Christian life of discipleship, formed and soaked in the word of God is not about detached morality, but about the formation of habits that sustain and define us. By that I don't mean eating five portions of fruit and veg, or taking a brisk walk each day. But the Christian life is about habit making, in order to grow more and more into the likeness of Christ. So we gather here day by day and week by week, doing this in remembrance of Jesus Christ, that God himself becomes manifest in our life together.

Let the word of God dwell in you richly

John Irving's novel, "*A Prayer for Owen Meany*" tells the story of two boys growing up in New England in the 1950s. Throughout the book they keep coming back to the same school basketball court to practice over and over again the same routine, a habit that becomes a ritual. The novel moves to its conclusion as the Vietnam war breaks out. A disturbed teenager, his life scarred by the social consequences of the war, sets about an appalling revenge. He prepares explosives to massacre a group of Vietnamese orphan children at an airport. In the dramatic climax, Owen uses his long-practiced basketball manoeuvre to catch a grenade, saving the orphan children, but costing him his life. The years of habit and ritual on the basketball court are manifest in the one moment of decisive action and saving grace.

Let the word of God dwell in you richly, the Colossians are told. Let it become the habit of your life to be immersed in the word of God, so that when you are called upon to act in accordance with that word, you do so instinctively, not in some agony of moral uprightness. Let the blueprint of God's living word dwell so deeply in your heart and soul that it manifests itself in the outward pattern of your life.

The theologian Sam Wells, writing about this very subject of forming habits as a way of Christian living, tells this story:

“One day in the 1950s, in an Edinburgh hospital, a child died tragically on an operating table. Later that week, two friends were discussing the tragedy. One expressed sympathy for the surgeon, but the other in response said this:

“I think the man is to blame. If anybody had handed me ether instead of chloroform, I would have known from the weight it was the wrong thing. You see, I know the man well. We were students together in Aberdeen, and he could have been one of the finest surgeons in Europe if only he had given his mind to it. But he didn’t. His mind was on other things. He used to do just enough to pass his exams and no more. That is how he lived his life – just enough to get through. So he never picked up those seemingly peripheral bits of knowledge that can one day be crucial. The other day in the theatre a bit of peripheral knowledge was crucial and he didn’t have it. But it wasn’t the other day that he failed – it was thirty-nine years ago, when he only gave himself half-heartedly to medicine.”

(Wells: Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics, SPCK)

It’s not our interpretation of selected verses of scripture which define us a so-called Bible based church. It’s the habits we form when we read, mark, learn and inwardly digest the word of God, day by day, week by week, prayerfully, faithfully and with hearts and lives open to the word of God who speaks to us through those words. It’s fundamental patterns of reading and praying and wrestling with the word, which become the life-shaping blueprint for our lives. It’s in allowing that word to dwell us richly that we become part of the repeated pattern of God’s creative word which continues to all eternity.

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giving thanks to God the Father through him.
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