

Luke 19:41-48

Seeking God's Vision 4: Looking Back

Eville Evensong, 23rd June 2024

As some of you will know we are currently in the middle of a sermon series on Seeking God's Vision which leads us up to our Weekend Away next weekend where we'll be Looking Forward together at where God may be calling us as Churches and as a Benefice in the coming years.

Over the course of the sermon series we've Looked Up, thinking about seeking God in order to seek God's Vision. We've Looked Out, thinking about what God is already doing in the world around us. We've Looked In, thinking about how we can build each other up as the Body of Christ.

And tonight we're going to be Looking Back, reflecting on the riches of the past to help us learn about the future. And I want to start by talking about Doctor Who.

Charlie and I have been watching a lot of Doctor Who recently, particularly this last week when Lucie has been away on a school residential trip – Doctor Who is a bit scary for her!

Charlie is just getting into the programme, whereas I've loved it for years – in fact one of my very early memories is of going round to a friend's house to play when I can't have been older than 4 or 5, and being terrified as his big sister was watching Doctor Who in the lounge – we dared each other to see who would be brave enough to sneak in and watch a bit!

I can usually get through an episode without having to hide behind the sofa these days, which is something of a relief, but there was something that the Doctor said in an episode me and Charlie were watching the other day that really struck me.

David Tennant was playing the Doctor in this particular episode, and Billie Piper was playing his companion, Rose. Rose had just met one of The Doctor's old companions who hadn't seen him for years, and was beginning to realise the dynamics of a relationship with a time traveller.

And the Doctor explains himself by saying "I don't age, but humans decay. You can spend the rest of your life with me, but I can't spend the rest of my life with you."

The lifespan of a Time Lord in that series is of a completely different order to that of a human. Now I know that Doctor Who is only a TV programme (I really do know that!), but there are plenty of other examples that I could use.

There's a Giant Tortoise on the island of St Helena which was born in the 1830s before Queen Victoria came to the throne, and which was first photographed in 1882.

In 2006 a Clam was dredged by a fishing boat off the coast of Iceland which was determined by scientists to have lived since 1499, when Henry VII was on the throne, making it over 500 years old.

There's a Yew tree in a Churchyard in Scotland which has been growing in that place since well before Jesus was born, and there's a Pine Tree in California that is closing in on 5,000 years old.

All of these creatures live lives that are on a timescale that is unimaginable to us. And yet what we humans can do, that as far as we know no other species is able to – certainly not to the same extent – is understand, measure, study that timescale.

We can learn from our past because the past has been handed on to us. And in England at least, the past is never more evident, never more present, than a Parish Church.

As we look around us tonight here in St Mary's we can see evidence of our forebears from the 20th Century, the 19th century, the 18th, 17th, 16, 15th, 14th, 13th, and 12th centuries, and even beyond that.

We are using a form of service from the 17th century, reading 20th century translations of scriptures from the first century AD, and the 8th century BC, along with 16th century translations of canticles from the 2nd century, and a psalm from the 6th century BC. We are singing hymns from the 19th, 18th, 17th and 8th centuries.

Our service is saturated in the past. But it's not old and dusty and out of date, because the beauty of Evensong is that it takes the riches of all that history, and uses that to draw us into the presence of the living, eternal God.

So when we think about Seeking God's Vision for the future of our Churches, as we will do next weekend, we mustn't ignore the past. We mustn't fall into the trap of thinking that we should always be looking for something new.

We should celebrate where we've come from, celebrate the riches of our inheritance. It is a privilege to be part of a worshipping community here in this place that has such deep deep roots.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, as we heard in our Gospel reading tonight, he headed straight for the temple, that ancient place of worship, because he knew the value of that place in holding the stories, the history, the imaginations of that community, as we know the value of this place in holding the stories, the history, the imaginations of this community.

But the trap of abandoning the old in search of the new is not the only trap that we could be tempted to fall into. Because there is also the danger of abandoning the new in search of the old. Of making our worship about the past, about the heritage, about the place. Making it a form of ancestor worship and not about the living eternal God.

As we heard in that Gospel reading, when Jesus entered the temple he wept because the people did not recognise God's presence among them.

This place stands here as a sign and symbol of God's presence in this community. But if it becomes simply a memorial to our ancestors, a place to celebrate our history, even a place to remember what God has done in the past, then we might as well take Jesus's words to heart and knock the whole place down and leave not one stone upon another.

We worship a living God, a God whose lifespan is of a different order of magnitude even to those ancient creatures and trees I mentioned earlier, even to the lifespan of Doctor Who!

And this place, this remarkable place, captures something of what it has meant to people to worship that living God for the best part of a thousand years.

We stand in that long tradition today, and our task, our challenge, is the same as it has always been - to proclaim that timeless good news afresh to each new generation, that they too may gather in this ancient holy place and worship the living God.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost;
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.