**Epiphany 3 Year A – Sunday 22nd January 2017**

Isaiah 9. 1 – 4
1 Corinthians 1. 10 – 18
Matthew 4. 12 – 23

Prayer

This season of Epiphany always reminds me of the gradual unveiling of a painting or sculpture or perhaps a painting that is being cleaned, at first dirty and with very few details apparent and then being transformed so that eventually we see the colours vividly and appreciate ever detail. We don’t get a full picture of the nature of Jesus immediately at Christmas. Yes, we are given hints but they are only hints and it depends on whether we are really attentive. But gradually over these few weeks of Epiphany before The Presentation of Christ in the Temple, Candlemas, the person and character of Jesus is revealed to us. That is no less the case today. But I want to take as my starting point, those few words from Paul’s fist letter to the Corinthians “the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God”.

Those words take us to the end or almost the end of the story but they reflect back upon our Gospel reading too. Of course Paul is right. For people of no faith, for people who do not know about Jesus, it is extraordinary that the cross, a Roman means of execution, should become for followers of Jesus a source of life and hope and forgiveness. Even as those who know that the cross was not the final word in the story, the indignity and shame and horror and pain of the cross cannot leave us unmoved, so why do we wear crosses around our necks, why is it that the cross goes before us as we enter for a service. Now of course we can rightly say that it reminds us of the victory of Christ over death and it reminds us that we are a forgiven people. But I think it has more to bring us and I want to explore a little further and to do that I am going to take three words: vulnerability, freedom and relationship.

So first vulnerability: one of the characteristics of human beings is that we like to be in control, or perhaps I should say, we like to have the feeling that we are in control. I may have told you the story of the surprise party that our children arranged for us last April. We were left behind in our flat and told that we would be collected at a particular time. We were told the sorts of clothes we were to wear but we really had no idea at all of what was in store. As our eldest daughter arrived to collect us we looked at each other and admitted that we were struggling because we were not in control. Both of us used to being in situations where we called the shots. We had a lovely evening and it was very good for us. A reminder that being in control is really an illusion. Jesus on the cross speaks into this. The time comes when Jesus ceases his active ministry and simply allows himself to be done to. He came into the world as pure gift. We do not determine what will happen to the gifts we give. So when he is arrested, when he is tried, when he is led out to calvary and nailed on the cross he gives himself without argument, without resistance. He is stripped of everything. He is completely vulnerable. It is from that place of utter vulnerability and self-giving that the resurrection comes, that life in all its fullness comes. In Jesus’ call of the first disciples we see something of the same vulnerability in their response. It’s easy to feel somewhat affronted by their immediate abandonment of their fishing business and to feel sorry for Zebedee. But it is perhaps our desire for safety and propriety that is determining that reaction. Those first disciples were prepared to make themselves vulnerable in more ways than one. They did not allow concern over what people might say to cloud their decision. They did not allow questions of material security or familial security to play a part. Now they may not manage such vulnerability throughout their lives as disciples but at that moment their response is clear. This has something to say to us. We are called to be one with Christ and that must mean accepting our own vulnerability, allowing ourselves to be stripped of all the things with which we surround ourselves to try and give the illusion that we are strong, that we are invincible, that we cannot be hurt. There is a beautiful poem by R.S Thomas entitled “The Kingdom” the final lines of which read “It’s a long way off but to get there takes no time and admission is free, if you will purge yourself of desire and present yourself with your need only and the simple offering of your faith, green as a leaf.”

My second word was freedom: in a sense, I have already hinted at the place of freedom. The folly of the cross is also the folly of freedom. Of the freely given selfhood of Christ. But that very freedom points us to the freedom of those first disciples. They were not coerced. They were not persuaded. It was a free response. The call of Christ, the invitation of Christ is there for the whole of humanity. We are all the beloved of God but there can never be anything coercive about the call or about our response. The church is of course a human institution and reflecting on the freedom that is the very essence of the call that we experience, has to remind us never to turn the church into an instrument of control. It is instructive to read in that first letter to the Corinthians of the factions that have entered into the community for which Paul chides them. Those factions are precisely symptoms of the human desire for control, for making things neat and tidy, for making this cosy. It is one of my delights – and I hope you are not going to disabuse me of this – that I do not perceive cliques or factions in this community. Long may it thus remain. We are called to make a free response and having made that free response we shall be overwhelmed by the quality of life that that freedom brings.

Finally relationship: the invitation of Jesus is an invitation to relationship. When Jesus called those first disciples he did not call them to follow any particular philosophical teaching. He did not call them because he wanted to use them. He called them because he wanted to enter into relationship with them. He called them to be his friends who would travel with him, who would spend time with him, who would eat with him, who would have fun with him, who would waste time with him. God in Christ calls each and every one of us into relationship with him and if we are in relationship with God in Christ then we must perforce be in relationship with our brothers and sisters and that does not just mean being in relationship with those who agree with us. It means being prepared to be in relationship with those who do not share our opinions, with those of other faiths too. Yesterday Edward and I spent the day at the at the Southbank Centre for the first day in a year- long festival entitled “Beyond Belief” so we went to panel discussions and talks about the place of belief and faith in our world. I went to a panel discussion on “Who is my neighbour” and one of the panellists described the experience of Imams and RC priests going together on a trip to the Jungle, the Calais refugee camp. He spoke of the way in which that shared act of outreach, of humanitarian kindness or one might even term it Abrahamic hospitality broke down the barriers between their faiths and created relationship between them. As people of faith, called by God, we are to be those who recognise and respect the image of God in others. This may not always be comfortable but it is part of that call to freedom and to relationship.

So as you go away and reflect on the readings you have heard today, think about that call to vulnerability which discloses our true humanity, think about the freedom that Christ offers to us and rejoice in the relationship we have with Jesus and ensure that that relationship is replicated in our relationships with all our brothers and sisters, both those whom we love and those whom we find difficult. The kingdom of God is truly an upside down kingdom and yes, the cross is folly to those who are perishing but to us who are being saved it is indeed the power of God who brings us life in all its fullness.