

‘Stir up we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people

So begins the old collect of this Sunday before Advent. It is said that among the staffs of the big houses, hearing this in Church on Sunday morning was the signal to begin preparing the Christmas puddings. And so this Sunday got the alternative title ‘Stir up Sunday’

Stir up we beseech thee..... This Sunday marks the end of the Church’s year, the end of a cycle within which we have celebrated the great events of faith. We prepare to begin another next week with the first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of the Church’s own distinctive preparation for Christmas, as we think about what does it mean to live in the light of the coming of Christ into the world, what it means to live in the light of our mortality.

Stir up we beseech thee the wills of thy faithful people We are about serious business, preparing to celebrate the Incarnation, God coming into the world, in the frailty of our humanity manifesting the power of divine love.

As we read our Lessons appointed for today, which are drawn together under the general heading of ‘Christ the King’, we realise that God was about serious business in the person of Jesus. In reading the Gospel accounts we encounter a Jesus with a very clear idea of his purpose before God. And so we read of him declaring before Pilate, ‘For this reason I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth.’ The Greek of the text of John’s Gospel is very strong; ‘I was bornfor this I came into the world’, are both in the past perfect tense, which signifies events in the past of lasting significance.

The birth, the life, the ministry, the passion of Jesus are seen in the New Testament as events of lasting import, of eternal significance. ‘Stir up we beseech thee

The writer of that strange mysterious book, the Revelation to St John the Divine, that

draws the Biblical canon to a close, greets his readers; ‘Grace to you who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his own blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father.’

At the heart of Incarnation, Emmanuel, ‘God with us’ in the person of Jesus, is the concept of gift. ‘God so loved the world that he gave; gift moreover with a purpose, that gift carries redemptive significance. I think of that ancient prayer that celebrates the fact that ‘he became like us so that we might become more like him’. So with John we acclaim him who ‘loves us and freed us from our sins ...’

The hymn writer, Graham Kendrick, in lovely economy of language, draws together many of these themes of Incarnation in the words of hymn 228:

‘Meekness and majesty,
manhood and deity,
in perfect harmony -
the man who is God;

.....
Lord of infinity,
stooping so tenderly,
lifts our humanity
to the heights of his throne.

What do I do with gift and what response does it evoke in hearts and lives. At our Carol Service and on Christmas Eve we will hear those familiar words from the Prologue of John’s Gospel:

‘He came to what was his own but his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him He gave power to become children of God.’

He became like us so that we might become more like him, He who loves us and freed us from our sins and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father.

Part of our response to Emmanuel, ‘God with us’ in the person of Jesus, is to enter into our priestly vocation. The writer of the 1st Letter of Peter speaks of this response: ‘Come to him And, like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.’ (*1 Peter 2:4ff*)

The call to priesthood, to be a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, was part of the vocation of the people of Israel; to which they were called as they assembled at the foot of Sinai prior to receiving of the commandments. As a people redeemed by God they are called to a new life before God, called to be a sign, to reveal God to the nations.

‘Stir up we beseech thee O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people; that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may of thee be plenteously rewarded: through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen’