

‘I am confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.’ (Philippians 1⁶)

In the early days of our marriage, we used to have a poster on the wall. It depicted a caterpillar chewing on a leaf, with the caption, ‘Be patient with me - God hasn’t finished with me yet.’ This poster came to my mind as I read over the portion appointed for the Epistle on this second Sunday of Advent, and in particular the words I took as my text,

‘I am confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.’

I want to take up this theme of my life before God as ‘work in progress’, moving towards a fulfilment in God’s purposes for me.

Last Sunday, you may recall, I reflected on the Christian life as a journey of a life time. A life, the late Archbishop Michael Ramsey reflected, lived as a continual response to our Baptism, discovering in the nuts and bolts of daily living what it means to die to sin and rise to new life in Christ.

We looked at the promises of our Baptism, promises that Michael Ramsey referred to as a yard stick for life.

‘Do you reject the devil and all proud rebellion against God?

Do you renounce the deceit and corruption of evil?

Do you repent of the sins that separate us from God and neighbour?

Do you turn to Christ as Saviour?

Do you submit to Christ as Lord?

Do you come to Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life?’

Questions not of people who have arrived, but questions asked of people who are on the way, on this journey into Christ, undertaken in the presence of Christ.

This idea of the continuing nature of our spiritual life before God is brought out in the technical language that Paul has chosen to use in his letter to the Philippians, the significance of which is lost in the process of translation.

The Greek word that we have translated as ‘to begin’ is *enarchestai*; the one we translate as ‘to complete’ is *epitelein*. In the language of the Greek society within which the Christians in Philippi lived, these are words associated with the ceremony of sacrifice in Greek religious life. The whole process of preparation of the sacrificial offering and the worshipper is covered by the term *enarchestai* and the completion of the whole act of sacrifice is covered by the word *epitelein*. So Paul is developing the idea of my whole ongoing life before God in terms of a spiritual sacrifice which is part of God’s work in my life as much as anything that I may bring to the process.

This ties in with an item I quoted from Michael Ramsey last week, in which he wrote, ‘Baptism declares that a man’s Christianity begins not with what he feels or experiences but with what God has done in Christ.’

God is there at every stage on my spiritual journey. He was there before I ever set out, there in the person of Jesus ; there as the ‘Word became flesh and lived among us full of grace and truth,’ in his life and ministry, in his death and resurrection. It is who, who by his Holy Spirit, who was there at the very beginning of my journey, alongside the encouragement of family and friends, awakening in me the first realisation of his call.

It is he who accompanies me along the way, strengthening me in times of weakness and temptation, drawing me back in times of disobedience and failure. Becoming like me, he enables me to become more like him, enabling me to live up to my call to live as one made in the image of God. ‘To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.’

I began by talking of caterpillars. Within the caterpillar there is all the potential, the beauty, the delicacy, the glory of the butterfly. It is work in progress. I too am work in progress - God has not finished with me yet. There is within each one of us something of the Christ who lived and died that we might live. As we travel this journey of life may we show forth more and more of him who calls us and travels the road with us.

‘Christ be beside me,
Christ be before me,
Christ be behind me,
King of my heart.

Christ be within me,
Christ be below me,
Christ be above me,
never to part. (*Hymn 611*)

He is indeed the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end of my pilgrimage,
the one in whom I live and dwell and have my being.