Homily for People and Parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 11th October 2026, Pentecost 20

Readings: Exodus 32:1-14 **Psalm 106:1-6, 20-24**
Philippians 4:1-9 **Matthew 22:1-14**

One of the things I love about Anglicanism is the ideal that our beliefs and practice come out of an ongoing dialogue between Scripture, Reason, and Tradition. So, when we receive new insight from science, we use our reason to reflect upon it with the help of Scripture and Tradition, and this can sometimes challenge us to change our view of things.

A clear example comes from the history of astronomy. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle put forward the idea that the earth was the centre of the universe, and that all stars and planets moved around it. This geocentric view remained virtually unchallenged for eighteen hundred years until the Polish priest and astronomer, Nicolaus Copernicus, put forward the theory that it is rather the earth which travels around the sun. This sun-centred, or heliocentric, view was accepted by the Roman Catholic Church and was used by Pope Gregory the thirteenth to revise the Church calendar in 1582.

However, when the Italian astronomer, Galileo, promoted this Copernican understanding in the early seventeenth century there was a new Pope, and a very conservative movement in the Church. Galileo was tried by the Inquisition, and the heliocentric way of understanding the universe was deemed to be, *'foolish, absurd, and heretical.'* The inquisitors noted that Psalm ninety-three states that *'God has established the world, and it shall never be moved',* and that similar affirmations are found in Psalms ninety-six and one hundred and four.

It seems strange to think of an astronomer being condemned by people who did not have expertise in physics or astronomy. People who critiqued his understanding by using an allegorical poem… in a literal way.

Instead of asking how this new way of understanding the universe could be integrated into theology and faith… it was rejected. After a Church court found him guilty of heresy Galileo spent the rest of his life under house arrest.

These days we can recognise that astronomy has gifted us with broader and more challenging ways of understanding our place in a vast, ever-expanding universe. Informed by this we might whisper a verse from the eighth Psalm, *"When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?"*

As we look back and learn from history, we can recognise that parts of Scripture were used to justify slavery in the southern states of the United States, and used to justify apartheid in South Africa. We can also recognise that some people used their reason to reflect on these realities before drawing from different parts of Scripture to challenge and bring to an end, both slavery and apartheid.

What are some things in our society that you and I find unsettling? As we use your reason to reflect on these, how does Scripture inform us? Do we have any sense that God wants things in our society and in our world to be different?

If we believe in a God who loves to an extraordinary degree, and who desires justice for the orphan, the widow, the oppressed, and the displaced… what are some implications for us?

If we genuinely believe in a Christ who suggested to the leaders of his own religion that their understanding of God was too small, and that there needed to be more grace and less judgement. What might Jesus be saying to us… in our time?

In the reading from Paul's letter to the church in Philippi this weekend we hear a profound insight. Sometimes Paul's writing needs a bit of unpacking, but in this instance the life-giving truth he wrote two thousand years ago speaks clearly to us. He wrote, *"Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."*

Philippians chapter four, verse eight – is certainly remembering, and remembering, and remembering again!

I encourage you to join me writing the verse on a bathroom mirror at home so we can see it each day when we wash our hands! Or, print the text and put it on the fridge, so we see it each time we get the milk. For the wisdom in the simple verse recognises that what we choose to think about has consequences for the way we live our life.

What we read, what we listen to, and what we watch… all have an impact on our thinking. Perhaps Paul would be astonished if he lived in our time to find that, if we choose, there can easily be no time without some form of distraction or entertainment. We can fill our minds with noise and images from the TV, from the radio, from our computer, and from our phone… twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

"…whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things..." is a helpful criteria for us to think about, and possibly use to review what Aps we're using on the phone, what games we're playing online, and what we are choosing to watch and listen to.

Do these things encourage goodness within us? Do they encourage hope, generosity, and a desire to serve – or, do they encourage within us cynicism, self-interest, and a sense of being overwhelmed? How do we find a healthy balance between the desire to be entertained, and the desire to learn? How do we find a healthy balance between passively consuming what's available, and actively contributing to it?

The verse from Philippians challenges us to sharpen our reason, and review what we're spending our time on! We are called to love God with our minds as well as our hearts, so, how can you and I better use the God given intellect we've each been given, to think more deeply about what we believe and why?

It is a comfort to remember that we are not left alone in this endeavour, for God's Spirit is present with us in the midst of each breath.

Let's close our time together, now, in prayer…

Gracious God, we give thanks for the gift of our lives and for the ability you've given us to reason. We offer you our intellect and pray that you give us wisdom. We ask your blessing on all who teach, and all who learn. We offer you the things in our society and our world that disturb us and pray that you guide us in where and how you would have us bring about good. We pray in the name of Christ. Amen.