

## Created for good works

Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne St James and All Saints Lent 4 2018

Keynote Bible passage: Ephesians 2.1 – 10, John 3.14 - 21

Not very often does one get opportunity to preach on a favourite scripture verse as part of the set reading of a Sunday, but today is the day! From Ephesians 2.10 we read: 'We are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.' You may also recall words to this effect put into a prayer in the 1662 Order of Holy Communion. With more contemporary wording it reads: 'Heavenly Father, assist us with your grace that we may continue in your holy fellowship and do such good works as you have prepared for us to walk in...' Let me share this morning why this verse has particular meaning - may I suggest for all of us.

1) We are now well into the season of Lent and this generally is regarded as a time of special devotion, and that's surely positive. Lent can also be a time when we *do* something. Let's think first then about the 'good works.' Lent focuses on Jesus' life and he sets an example for us. Indeed, Peter in a Sermon in Acts reflected: 'God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power how he went about doing good, and healing all who were oppressed by the devil.' Why the 'doing good'? Not actions so that one might get into heaven thus earning one's way into eternal life. Indeed, from today's epistle Paul says that just can't happen. He is mindful of human disobedience (because of sins and trespasses). Rather it is because of the richness of God's mercy we have been and are loved, and as a consequence of this love we have been raised up to be with Christ. We are 'saved'. Thus, here is an assurance of the special *salvation relationship* we have with Jesus. The theological expression he mentions – 'you have been saved by grace'. So, it's not reward but *actions of good works* we want to do. Grace is that loving, godly quality we receive to keep us in relationship with Jesus. St Paul's prayer is that we might experience the immeasurable riches of his grace in Christ Jesus. And rounding off his thoughts on this subject Paul writes this grace 'is the gift of God, not the result of works so that no one may boast.' It is for this purpose – and we come to the key verse: 'we are created in Christ Jesus for good works....'

What then are the '*good works*'? One might respond with a question to ask when there's the choice – 'WWJD – what would Jesus do? In our humanity, and despite our humanity we are afforded the capability of being able to do good works, because we are created by God. For me this has to do with relationship – relationship with God in Trinity, relationship with family and friends, with showing mercy and with care for and nurturing creation.

2) Now we come to the second part of the verse – good works....'which God created beforehand to be our way of life.'. This may sound a little like predestination, but it's not. To paraphrase personally I regard life and what might be as possibilities – as though God is setting out options, and it's for me to find what they are then do them. This includes having eyes opened to 'see' the options, and the will to do them. 'We are created for good works which God prepared beforehand'. It is living out in that inner sensing – to show care and compassion, to be there for others in their need. It is hearing that inner prompting to act in some way in a situation, it is as the hymn goes - 'Sometimes a light surprises... We are given insight or intuition to act in some way, or to 'see inwardly'. Or to suggest – stay focussed on Jesus and his way and guiding.

For example, personally there's been crisis situations where people have commented '.... you were meant to be there..' Or – after on the recent voyage south with the weather so good and people knowing my being a minister giving God the glory in creation – 'you must have a direct connection with 'up there'. Of course, this doesn't always happen, but it goes to show one's witness is often noticed.

Surely also for you, there have been times it seemed 'right' you were in a certain situation. That's what I mean by the possibilities. Time and again in ministry there were the unrealised experiences of being 'in the right place at the right time.' That's an aspect of the insight of this verse.

3) Today's gospel adds a further dimension to these insights. This includes a verse beloved of many, and indeed one with which I associate evangelist Billy Graham, recently deceased in his hundredth year. The famous John 3.16: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.' I well remember attending one of his Crusades and hearing that appeal to 'be saved' – to receive salvation and enter the salvation relationship with Jesus. How this verse links in with my theme is that it reveals an overall dimension, as we consider God's desire for *all* humanity. God so loved the world...- that could be humans and indeed it can be extended to the uniqueness of the creation of Planet Earth and us experiencing life. The passage recognises that some intentionally do evil actions '(loving darkness)'. For others there's the hope and possibility: 'John 3,21: 'Those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may clearly be seen that their deeds have been done in God.'

In concluding, now to link up the prayer of the Prayer Book service earlier referred to – 'that we may do the good works you have created for us to walk in'. The collect prayer request builds on it: 'Loving God...lead and strengthen us by your Holy Spirit that our lives may give glory to you.' Amen