

17th Sunday after Trinity, Year C

1 Timothy 3.14-4.6

“Indeed, the mystery of godliness is certainly great:

He was revealed in the flesh,
and justified in the spirit,
he appeared to angels,
and was announced to Gentiles,
he was believed in the world,
and taken up in glory.” *1 Tim3.16*

The word ‘mystery’ today often is meant to be a word for something for which there is ‘no explanation’: something we can’t understand and probably never will. That is, indeed, not far from the meaning that the word had for people in Paul’s day. But there was an all-important twist. In many of the popular religions of Paul’s world the idea of a ‘mystery’ wasn’t just something that you couldn’t understand; it was something that most people couldn’t and didn’t understand, but that some did. And often those who ‘knew’ the mystery of a religion would keep it secret to make sure everyone else stayed in the dark.

Thus, this sort of mystery was for the chosen few, the ‘inner circle’, those who had been initiated into the religion. They were kind of a secret code, the secret to the meaning of life, the universe, God, everything; the secret too, to someone’s own life, the hidden clue that would make sense of everything and bring you peace of mind, salvation, or whatever else the religion in question might be offering. And some of these ‘mysteries’ came in secret formulae, magical mantras that could be constantly repeated, reminding yourself of the hidden truths and hoping that they would transform your life.

So when Christianity makes its way into this world, it was treated like all the other religions. But that wasn’t how Paul or any of the other apostles saw it. Christianity for them was first and foremost the fulfilment of the sharp-edged promises made by the One True God to Israel – and the God of Israel towered above the pagan ‘gods’ the way

Mount Everest towers above a tiny, Himalayan village. But Paul was more than prepared to take people on in the terms they were used to; and that's why we find the word 'mystery' in verse 16.

So, they say, it's 'mysteries' you want, is it? You're eager for hidden knowledge, the secrets of the universe, the formula that'll change your life? Well, here's the 'mystery' that's now revealed to the entire world! But this isn't just one mystery amongst many. This is the real thing. This isn't just a secret, it's a story; not just any old story, but the true story, the story of the God who *became human* and who now *rules the whole world as its rightful Lord*. This 'mystery' won't lead you inwards, into a secret, private 'religion'. It will change your life all right – by leading you out into a new way of life, a way of service and faith and discipleship and hope.

Who is the mystery? Jesus Christ. The six-line jingle of verse 16 invites us to mull it over in the presence of God, to allow the strange contrasts to demolish the normal assumptions about how the world worked, how human life worked, how (so to speak) God worked, and to build up a new picture with Jesus right in the middle of it.

He is the mystery "...revealed in flesh, and justified in the spirit..." The idea of any divine being making an appearance in human form would have been exciting enough for most people in the ancient world; but Christians went one further. The one whom we worship has actually become flesh, become genuinely human, capable of laughter and tears, of suffering and dying. But after this death, God had vindicated him, by the creator spirit through whose power Jesus was raised from the dead. Thus the mystery opens with the forceful and central statement of Christian faith: Christ died for our sins and was raised from the dead.

Jesus also "...appeared to angels, and was announced to Gentiles." Jesus will come again. But he's no distant memory, absent from sight and mind. No: he is 'announced' to the entire world. And the word 'announced' is the word we might use, not so much of a new religious option we were encouraging people to try out, but of a new emperor, a new

ruler, we are summoning them to obey, perhaps even worship. In this Jesus, supersedes, dwarfs, the gods and rulers of our day, the ones who live to dominate our world. Back then they were known as Zeus, Aphrodite, Diana, Apollo and the Roman Emperors such as Augustus, Nero and Domitian. Nowadays they still exist but by different names: war, lust, greed, oppression, money and so on. Jesus is our true Lord and we worship him. We give him 'worth' because of who he is, what he has done, what he is doing now and what he will do in the future.

Jesus is also the one '...believed in the world, and taken up in glory.' Once again, the heavenly and earthly stories are being told side by side. To be a believer is to be rich in trust and loyalty to God, not just belief in particular doctrines. We are celebrating the fact that Jesus isn't simply announced to the wider world; but that people are giving him their believing allegiance. He is the one who, having been exalted to glory, is now ruling the world as its genuine Lord.

Those six lines of verse 16 may be compact, but they capture the rich flavour of Christian spirituality – and the way it challenges us and our world.

Base your life on this strange but powerful 'mystery'. Allow your story, your own personal story to be reshaped around the story of Jesus himself. Discover through this that you are part of the 'the assembly of the living God'; that you're not part of the gatherings of the 'gods' of popular culture. Discover that you are part of a community that is part of the stabilising force that helps God's truth to stand up and be seen in the world.

If our church is founded solidly on God's truth, what people see and know of God's truth will be based on our life and witness as God's people. That is the purpose of this letter: that we may learn as a church what it means to share a common life, grounded in the mystery of Christ, through which the watching world can see who its rightful Lord is.