

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 2 January 2022

O God, our guide, set your path clearly before us and lead us to follow you willingly for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Ephesians 1:3-14; John 1:10-18

The chosen

During the Christmas holidays, I watched a documentary titled, *Myths and Monsters* on Netflix. These documentary series present some of the most enduring myths/legends of European culture. I only watched the first episode, *Heroes and Villain*. We may say that heroes are the chosen few who may do something good for others. Indeed, in *Heroes and Villain*, a few examples of heroes' journeys are presented that follow a certain template.¹ Joseph Campbell who produced a template says that we can identify the same template in many other myths in the world. In many ways, *The Hero's Journey* resembles our Christian life. Like heroes/heroines, we are the chosen and called to adventure. But unlike heroes whose adventure mainly consists of defeating villains and restoring the normal order in the world, we – the chosen by God - are called to continue the work of God in this world. As such, there are a number of differences, including the final part of the adventure. For example, heroes may return to the normal world where s/he started the journey. But for us, it is the new life and the new world that have already begun when we are chosen. In the present life, we are working towards the goal of life. We'll see it in details through the readings.

Ephesians 1:4 reads that the believers in Christ are chosen before the foundation of the world. It is a classic statement of the doctrine of election in that we hold a unique place in the heart of God. Being chosen didn't happen randomly as it requires double conditions – God did the election, and it is done for those in Christ. Being chosen by God also promises spiritual blessings. As the word 'chosen' shows, we are chosen not because we deserve it but because God loves those who have no claim on that love. Here our relationship with Jesus comes into view. Jesus is 'the Beloved', whose relationship with God is revealed as the Word of God in the beginning. In this Jesus Christ, we are adopted into the family life of God, and we can join the communion of love between Father, Son and Spirit. Yet it doesn't leave us passive

¹ Campbell, Joseph, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, Princeton University Press, 2006

spectators. When we hear this good news, we put our trust in Christ,² which is expressed through baptism.³ As the first generation of this God family, we might live ‘for the praise of his glory,’⁴ which we may not understand at all without Incarnation.

The Word became flesh in v 14 holds the key to understanding the glory of God. John traces the Word back to the very beginning - before time - before the creation of the world. The Word is not part of the creation. It was not created but stood with God before the creation. The Word became flesh⁵ - *Incarnation* is a startling statement for the Greeks together with the Jews. For dualistic Greeks, who believe that all matter is evil, the thought of God becoming flesh - *sarx* is unimaginable.⁶ Paul uses flesh (*sarx*) to speak of the sins of the flesh. For the Jews, it is contrary to the prevailing Jewish thought of God who is working alone in creation. It is also against their belief by which any doctrine or concept of an incarnation of God in any form is totally rejected. Even so, the first Christian martyr, Stephen, prays to Jesus, not to Yahweh as he has been taught by speaking to Jesus as if Israel prayed to God -“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”⁷ Here Jesus recognized as divine is not something that was added to Jesus by his overly enthusiastic followers, but it was there right after his resurrection and ascension.⁸ The Incarnation is that God doesn’t leave us alone in the midst of chaos, pain and sin. God personally wants to meet us here and now. “God risks relationship, dares to give Godself into human hands, becomes a body. No woozy mysticism, high-flown idealism, or fuzzy spirituality adequately describes the God who not only invented flesh but also became our flesh.”⁹ Jesus makes God visible and actively present as the supreme instance of God’s agency. As such, if someone claims that there is no God since God is large, distant, and unknowable, it would only reveal their ignorance by displaying their intellectual constriction and presumption by claiming knowledge of God.¹⁰ Incarnation is a Jew from Nazareth who lived briefly, died violently, rose unexpectedly, and was God, and only this God can save us. A God who is distant from us can’t

² Ephesians 1:13

³ ditto

⁴ Ephesians 1:12

⁵ Greek: *sarx* (flesh)

⁶ Romans 8:3

⁷ Acts 7:59

⁸ Willimon, William H, *God turned toward us: The ABCs of Christian Faith.*

⁹ ditto

¹⁰ ditto

save. It is how we have seen his glory¹¹ and we might live for the praise of his glory.¹² If so, what kind of life are the chosen might live?

There are great differences between the life of heroes and the life of believers in Christ. When a hero crosses the threshold that separates the normal world from the unknown world, his adventure begins. At this stage, he may meet a mentor, and supernatural aid as he may not be strong enough to defeat the villain. In our case, God is accompanying us from the beginning. But God doesn't give us physical power to defeat villains in the world. Rather we are learning how to decrease ourselves so that Christ will increase.¹³ In this process, namely sanctification, we are becoming like Jesus who loved us till the end. Unlike the heroes who return to the normal world where he left as changed men, our goal is to be with God ultimately, depicted in Revelation.¹⁴ The life of the chosen in Christ is no longer the same as before together with the world that the chosen will live. For us, living the new normal in Christ is to live as servants in God's way, with God's eyes and with God's intentions. It will not be cost-free, but it brings the blessings of Ephesians 1:3 and the 'grace upon grace' of John 1:16. May God bless us continue to live as the chosen today and always. Amen.

¹¹ John 1:14

¹² Ephesians 1:12

¹³ John 3:30; cf 2 Corinthians 12:10

¹⁴ Revelation 21:10