

Rejoice - Reflection

Ephesians 1:3-14

John 1: 10-18

There's a theme we find in both of our New Testament readings today, and it is particularly pertinent for the start of a new calendar year. In both the John and the Ephesians readings, the author is looking back onto past tradition to find the words and encouragement for the community to move forward.

These two texts were written at a reasonably similar time – probably towards the end of the writings of the New Testament. Although they were written in different locations and to different communities, the context is similar. The first Christians had expected Christ's return within their lifetime and much of the earliest theology – represented in the uncontested letters of Paul – shows clearly this was the expectation. By the time these works were written, the generation who had actually known Jesus had all died, and possibly even the next generation were getting older. There was once again the need to rethink what their faith meant.

Whereas the earlier Christian communities argued over the issue of whether one had to become Jewish in order to be a proper Christian, we now see that argument shift. Not only are the Christians no longer welcome in the synagogues, they have now lost the protection that being seen as part of Judaism afforded them. The first waves of persecution by Rome had happened and had spread beyond Rome. It is important to note that on one level this was not empire wide. Ancient judges wrote about not seeking out Christians, but if someone was accused, they would be questioned and judged. Because of this, persecution was more prevalent in the cities. The Christians who lived in the country and those who could afford to move were reasonably safe; the poor city Christians and those who stood by them were in danger.

The other issue that both these communities faced was the early emergence of Gnosticism, which denied the full humanity of Christ. One branch of Gnosticism argued that it only appeared that Christ suffered on the cross – and many convoluted justifications of how the crucifixion happened were put forward. And so, these two authors wrote to their different communities, looking back to help their communities look forward with hope.

What we call the letter to the Ephesians did not originally have a location attached. The most likely scenario is that a church leader decided to bundle up the letters of Paul and send copies out to the churches that needed to hear those words, perhaps because they had known Paul, or at least known of him, and needed to be reminded of his encouragement. The author draws on and develops Paul's ideas to speak into this new time with its new challenges.

The author of the Fourth Gospel was probably a literate person who had been part of the community for years. The community is facing internal and external conflict (with the former somewhat likely to be the heresy of Gnosticism) and, depending on when the letter is dated, the apostle John being too elderly to lead – or perhaps an urgency to write down his stories before they are corrupted and forgotten.

Both authors start with a grand, sweeping statement of the cosmic Christ in a way that looks back to traditions and looks forward to what this means for their community in their day. The author of John uses the Wisdom tradition found in Proverbs, changing "Wisdom" to "Word." The author of Ephesians uses Passover blessing prayers – Blesséd be God.

Painting imagery of the richness of God's blessing to the people in becoming part of the human story in a unique way. This is not like the Greek gods who came to earth, messed around – usually getting a woman into trouble – and then returning. This is the story of God incarnate in human form, understanding all that it is to be human, our pain and our struggle. And for the communities facing persecution, which could include being tortured to death, this was also the story of God knowing what that experience is like and therefore not asking the Christian community to do something that God had been unable to do.

In those stories of incarnation and redemption, the early communities are given hope and reason for joy. They can persist in their faith because they are not alone in those experiences. The message is clear. God is faithful. God has rescued the people in the past and will do so again in the future. What we have now is not all there will be. What we experience now is not the full blessing, but one day that will be fulfilled. And in this there can be joy and hope despite our current circumstances.

And what of us? I wonder what would be written if we were to receive a letter written to us in our time. There are some challenges that we no longer face – Christians in Australia, for example, are not persecuted as the first audiences were. We are rediscovering what it means to be a minority part of the culture rather than in a culture that at least claims to be Christian. We also have our traditions on which to draw and which need to be reinterpreted for a new context.

As we look over the year that was and reflect on the year that will be, what do we need to take forward? What do we need to reinterpret so it can continue to have meaning? And what, most challengingly, will we need to leave behind?