

**STETS Awards Presentation Celebration Communion Service Sermon, October 9<sup>th</sup> 2010, St Thomas' Church, Salisbury – Revd Dr Philip Richter**

**'The earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea' (Is 11:6).**

When I was at school my reports would usually say 'making good progress', although it was never clear what I was progressing to. My computer sometimes tells me that it's making progress downloading a file, sometimes painfully slowly. We live in a society obsessed by hitting targets, reaching goals, making progress. But today we rightly pause and celebrate the progress of those who have received their awards – as they reflect on the past three or more years they will recognise the progress they have made, academically and spiritually, sometimes painfully, sometimes two steps forward, one step back, but today we praise God for that progress!

Each of us has personal goals that we may or may not be achieving. One of my friends took up jogging recently to lose weight. He's just taken part in the Great North Run to raise cash for MIND . Amazing progress by someone who was quite unfit. The New Testament sometimes talks about personal progress in terms of a running race: 'press forward to the finishing line' (Phil 3:12); 'run to win' (1 Cor 9:25); 'finish the race' (Acts 20:24). Making progress is a good thing: pilgrims need to make progress! Although it's not just about a distant goal, it's about becoming what you already are by the grace of God. And these are not just personal development goals: according to the Book of Acts, 'finishing the course' involves 'testifying to the good news of God's grace'. Have you noticed how Acts is right from the start about progress: 'you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth', it begins (1:8); one scholar has called this an 'evaluation instrument' for the followers of Jesus; and there are at least six progress reports on the spread of the gospel as you read through Acts, though, it's true, we're left in suspense at the end or, maybe, invited to live out the rest of the story ourselves! The one goal that matters, according to St Paul, writing to the Philippians, is to 'know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings' (Phil 3:10). Paul celebrates that the Philippians have shared in the gospel 'from the first day' and says that he is confident that 'the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion' (1:6). In other words, you're making excellent progress!

But there is another meaning to 'progress' as we understand it today - the idea that the world can become increasingly better. I wonder, is this the sort of progress we should aim at? Or is this just a corrupted version of the old Christian doctrine of providence? The idea of progress surely has a strong Christian and Jewish pedigree: the sense within Judaism of history being divinely guided towards a new age of peace and justice; the sense, within Christianity, of there being one human race, made in God's image, marred by sin but redeemable and perfectible; the sense of God's design for the world, present from the beginning and still unfolding; the sense that God's Kingdom can already come, or at least begin, on earth as in heaven; the sense of the Church, changing and developing over time and destined to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth; and the hope of a climax to history that will make sense of everything that has gone before. The seeds were already there, even if the idea of progress as we know it today is more recent. Mind you, there are also some big differences. Progress in secular terms is about *human* initiative and effort, and God is missed from the equation. Progress rubbishes the past, and devalues the importance of tradition. Progress is something inevitable, rather than a possibility. Progress is one-directional, rather than something

that can regress because of human self-centredness and lack of vision. Sometimes we make an idol of progress and are sentimentally optimistic – and need a healthy dose of Christian realism!

It's true that in many aspects our society has lost faith in that idol of progress. We no longer expect education and the flowering of reason to take us onwards and upwards. And natural evolution is not so much progress as blind chance – so that the human race might one day be as extinct as the dinosaurs. And our faith in humanity's progressive growth in goodness was already cruelly shattered by the carnage of the First World War: as Thomas Hardy put it: 'After two thousand years of mass, We've got as far as poison-gas' ('Christmas 1924'). But don't we still retain faith in progress in terms of GDP and technology? Nations expect to get richer and richer, even if this brings no matching rise in happiness. And we invest prodigious faith in scientific and technological progress. In medicine we hope for those 'penicillin moments' through advances such as DNA sequencing, although there is sometimes more hype than hope. And many of us eagerly await the next gadget: can you remember life pre-computers, pre-mobiles, pre-iPad? And yet, amazed as we are by the achievements of science, we know the other side of the coin: nuclear weapons as well as nuclear power, internet crime as well as internet knowledge, electronic surveillance as well as social networking. If the quest for technological progress becomes separated from any sense of common social goals, this may actually spell regress, or even full stop, for the human race.

Are we making progress in terms of our world becoming better, in terms of the wellbeing of humanity? It depends what measures we use. *It's getting better all the time* is the title of a 300 page book by Moore and Simon (Moore & Simon 2000). If you had been sitting in this fine church in the Middle Ages, 90% of you would have been illiterate and many of you already dead. On the other hand, progress sometimes seems excruciatingly slow – will we reach the millennium poverty-reduction goals by 2015? The jury is currently out. Is the Church making progress, or is it in rapid decline? Again, it depends what measures we use: faithfulness and numerical growth don't always go together. In God's economy things as tiny as mustard seeds and yeast can have immense impact out of all proportion to their size.

Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the heyday of faith in progress, Arthur Ainger composed the hymn: 'God is working his purpose out'. Ainger was a master at Eton College and you might think that this is an over-confident and over-optimistic hymn: 'nearer and nearer draws the time... when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea' – except you'll notice that those words were inspired by the last verse of today's reading from Isaiah. And one of the real strengths of the hymn is the way it lifts our eyes to the big picture, to progress in its deepest sense – the progress of God's purpose 'as year succeeds to year'. Like many of you, I'm short-sighted. Without my glasses anything in the distance is blurred. [Research](#) suggests I can blame my environment as well as my genes: there appears to be much less short-sightedness when people spend more time outside and regularly look into the distance, especially when they're young – perhaps I did too much close-up reading! But perhaps any of us can develop spiritual myopia if we ever lose that sense of the big picture that Ainger invokes in this hymn – and progress can be reduced to our individual personal development goals or our quest for the latest gadget. Or we can become paralysed by our own sense that we are not making progress in our Christian life – if so, we surely need to see the big picture again: the God who constantly redeems and restores, and brings the whole world, including you and me, to completion.

It's true that today we may be more reticent about speaking of God's purpose: too many wrongs have been committed by people too sure of God's purpose. Episcopal priest, Nancy Roth, has suggested that Christian progress is actually more like a jazz improvisation, or a dance, than marching towards a goal. I leave the last word with her:

We are tossed various themes along the way - by the clarinettist or... pianist, by the illness of a family member or the opportunity to start a new career – and we take these themes and “work with them”, embellishing and elaborating them, making new music.

God is ‘working his purpose out’ as God:

takes the raw material of all the motifs of life and plays with them, creating new melodies. We are part of the ensemble, improvising alongside God. With God's help we can also help to “work God's purpose out”, bringing the music of truth, justice, mercy and loving kindness to our sorry world. (Roth 1999, pp.164-5)

**‘The earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea’**

[The sermon was followed, in [Remonstrant Church](#) fashion, by music for reflection – an improvisation of ‘God is working his purpose out’.]

Bibliography:

Roth, N., 1999. *Awake, my soul! : meditating on hymns for year B*, New York: Church Pub.

Moore, S. & Simon, J., 2000. *It's getting better all the time : 100 greatest trends of the 20th century*, Washington D.C.: Cato Institute.

Readings:

Isaiah 11:1-9

Hebs 12:1-2

Lk: 13:18-21