

Sermon

Sunday 10th January, 2010

Lessons

Ephesians 3: 1 – 12

St Matthew 2: 1 – 12

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

O God, the strength of the souls that seek You; direct our thinking, and our speaking, and our hearing; that we may more fully know You, and more perfectly love You; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sciennes, as we know, is an area of Edinburgh just outside the city centre and south of The Meadows. It is one of a number of areas, originally remote from the City, sited on the Burgh Muir. According to Wikipedia, the area was known to be attractive to ‘vagabonds, vagrants and outlaws’ who found shelter under its large trees, far from the authorities. In 1517, the Pope gave permission for the establishment of a Dominican convent dedicated to Catherine of Sienna. The convent was destroyed in the Reformation in 1559. The last remains of the convent can still be seen in the gardens of 16 St Catherine's Place, and are marked by a plaque. The name Sciennes is derived from this convent's connection with Siena (Sienna). We may well be familiar with that history but how much do we know of St Catherine. The parish church for Sciennes is named after her, but how much do we know about St Catherine? Belief in the Communion of Saints is a tremendous enrichment to personal faith and source of strength. The named saints were the giants of our faith. We have much to learn from them: they can become our friends, the giants on

whose shoulders we stand. How much do we know about St Catherine of Sienna, a woman whose name has been associated with that area, that ground, that soil, for five hundred years? In April 2000, the Pope named St Catherine as one of the Patrons of Europe, but what do we know about her? What can we learn from this saint?

St Catherine lived in the fourteen century. Her world was in many ways no different from ours:

Catherine's Europe was....marked by violence and an uncertain future: the papacy had fled to Avignon, splitting the Church and dividing countries, cities and religious orders...; cities were being decimated by the bubonic plague, known as the Black Death; there was a decline of vitality in the Church, a loss of sense of purpose and a crisis of religious life.¹

When he named Catherine as one of the Patrons of Europe, Pope John Paul II said that she dived 'into the thick of the ecclesiastical and social issues of her time.' She challenged the political and religious leaders of her day, in person and in writing. She did not hesitate to tell the Pope that 'he must be brave and return to Rome.' It is said that she visited the prisons, cared for the poor and the sick and was 'consumed by an urgency to bring God's love and mercy to everyone.'² In the early Church, one of the images used for Christ was fire, a living flame, and there can be no doubt that Catherine was possessed of that fire, a sensation of the Spirit of Christ fully alive within her.

¹ Timothy Radcliffe *I Call You Friends* p175f

² *Ibid* p176

Catherine had an intense love for the Church and on occasion was hugely critical of the clergy and bishops for their pursuit of wealth and position and their evident lack of spirituality. She was formidable and dared even to tell God what to do. Catherine prayed to God:

You know how and you are able and it is your will,
so I plead with you to have mercy on the world,
and to restore the warmth of charity and peace
and unity to holy Church. It is my will that you
do not delay any longer.³

In one prayer or meditation, she said to God, ‘You make the heart big, not stingy – so big that it has room in its loving charity for everyone.’ God replied, ‘I who am infinite God want you to serve me with what is infinite, and you have nothing infinite except your soul’s desire.’⁴ It was in what she described as her ‘cell of self-knowledge’ that she discovered God loved her into existence. In prayer, in meditation, God said to her:

It was with providence that I created you, and when I contemplated my creature in myself, I fell in love with the beauty of my creation.⁵

Are you surprised that this is the language of intimacy, of a love affair? God said to Catherine, ‘I fell in love with the beauty of my creation....with you!’

The Swiss theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote:

³ ibid p177

⁴ ibid p179

⁵ ibid p180

How can anyone seriously believe that God is love and gave himself up for us on the cross because he loved us from eternity, chose us and destined us for a blessed eternity with him, how can anyone seriously 'hold as true' all this and, at the same time, withhold his love from God or doubt God's love for him?⁶

No single Christian tradition is perfect; each one is flawed but in a different way. Protestantism is flawed. The churches which stand within Protestantism, of which the Reformed Church – our own – is a good example, have a vivid sense of God revealing God's Self through the written Word, through Scripture. Passion for the Word is essential but a one-sided emphasis on the study of the written Word externalises God and makes doctrine and understanding and explaining God to be of prime importance. You do not spend your time with your lover, partner, wife or husband trying to explain them or define them. What you need is intimacy; it is a different kind of knowing. It is true that we are not to leave our brains at the door of a church; we ought to be challenged in our understanding of God, but if God is only up here in the head, then we are missing something and should do something about it. It is because the Protestant tradition places too much emphasis on being clever, on trying to understand and define God – and that's what becomes important – that we end up with so many splits and divisions and disunity. The story of the wise men, the three kings, the Magi, is a faith narrative, a creative myth, which tells us that the way to encounter the Living God, the Mystery at the centre of creation, the Holy One, is be prepared to go on a spiritual journey and before that Mystery to

⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar *Prayer* p27f

bow down, to kneel, and offer that Mystery our lives, our devotion, our infinite desire.

How open are we to allowing God to express Himself in our lives in a new way? Are we prepared to know God in a new way? Maybe some of us are always open to the Spirit's prompting. God is the Living God and we are on a journey. We ought to expect Him to say new things to us or, at the very least, we ought to hear Him say things we have never heard before. The Risen Christ when he met the weeping Magdalen at the tomb said, 'Mary!' He knew her better than she knew herself. God is more inward to us than we are to ourselves. He knows our name, our story and, following the example of St Catherine, it is with the knowledge that God has fallen in love with us that we can grow, feel liberated, hold our heads up, and use our faith, our infinite desire and our passion, to dive into the thick of the ecclesiastical and social issues of our time.

If on the matter of homosexuality and gay clergy our church is more concerned with right understanding of the written Word rather than intimacy with Christ, then we will fracture. If, on the other hand, we hear in our hearts Jesus whisper to us, 'Love one another and let the world know that you are my disciples,' what would we do then? If on the matter of climate change our church is more concerned with its own survival rather than the survival of the planet, of God's

world, of God's children, then we will have failed in our calling. If, on the other hand, we could hear God speak to us through the words of His prophet Jeremiah, 'stand at the crossroads, and look, and ask....where the good way lies, and walk in it,' what would we do then? Or to hear the LORD say to us, 'I brought you into a plentiful land....but you made my heritage an abomination': what changes would we make? If we are a church lacking in self-confidence, in vitality, how much of that is due to our reliance upon our own resources and not upon God? If we could hear Jesus say in the mind of our hearts, 'I will be with you always,' then does that not change how we live and speak and relate to one another?

St Catherine of Sienna is, in a sense, our saint: we walk her streets. God's gift to her was her soul's infinite desire and she dived, she dived, into the ecclesiastical and social challenges of her day. We are very fortunate to be able to associate ourselves with St Catherine.

Amen.