

Sermon

Sunday 11th October, 2009

Lessons Job 23: 1 – 9, 16 – 17 Hebrews 4: 12 – 16 St Mark 10: 17 – 31

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of Your Holy Spirit; and by the same unite us with You in that bond which neither things present nor things to come shall ever break. Grant this for the sake of our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Now as He was going out on the road, one came running, knelt down before Him, and asked Him, ‘Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?’

St Mark 10: 17

In the Old Testament faith narrative, Job said of God, ‘Oh, that I knew where I might find Him, That I might come to His seat! I would present my case before Him, And fill my mouth with arguments.’ Job has suffered great tragedy in his life and he desires nothing more than to confront God with his complaint: he wishes to present God with a law suit; he wishes to take a legal action against God. Job said, ‘I go forward, but He is not there, And backward, but I cannot perceive Him.’ He wants to meet with God, see Him face to face, complain in person if you like; Job wants to lay before God his sense of injustice at all that has happened to him in his life – the loss of his health, wealth and loved ones. Towards the end of the faith narrative, the end of the story, God confronts Job and we hear Job say to God, ‘I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, But now my eye sees You.’ Job is granted his wish. Fed by an intelligent faith and an inescapable pain, with all his heart Job desired to see God face to face – and he does. How does he react when confronted with God? We hear Job say

to God, 'I abhor myself, And repent in dust and ashes.' Seeing God face to face, Job for the first time in his life felt wholly, entirely, inadequate: he loathed himself, felt unworthy, and repented in dust and ashes. In this most ancient of faith narratives, once Job has seen God face to face, once he has understood the gulf of knowledge and wisdom between humanity and God, he felt humble and repented of his sins. And then, Job's health, wealth and the gift of family are restored to him. Is this faith narrative about the realities of this life, the trials and difficulties, the suffering, the inexplicable evils and does this narrative promise eternity with God, dwelling with God face to face, where we will live in harmony, peace, and fulfilment, where all the injustices, mistakes, wrongs, hurts and agonies are taken away? Do you believe in eternal life, life after death? And, if so, what will it be like?

Writing on the nature of everlasting life, the twentieth century theologian, E J Fortman, got a little carried away. Fortman wrote:

[The redeemed] will have telepathic powers by which they will be able to communicate thoughts and desires and feelings to one another....They will have clairvoyant powers by which they will be able to perceive objects and scenes and forms that are distant in space and time....precognitive powers by which they can have advance knowledge of future occurrences...psych-kinetic powers by which they can affect and move and most likely transform matter even at a distance.....They will be agile, able to move easily from place to place, perhaps from planet to planet and from one part of the cosmos to another – with the speed of thought.

It would be arrogant of me to categorically refute his vision of eternal life, his vision of heaven, but to me it does not feel right: Fortman's vision is all about our powers and not at all about our relationship with God and God's children of every generation.

Down the many centuries of Christian history, the saints of the Church have gifted to us treasures from their spiritual wisdom and learning. The Reformer, Martin Luther, said, 'The Holy Ghost...will raise me up and all the dead, and will grant everlasting life to me and to all who believe in Christ.' The Heidelberg Catechism of the sixteenth century states:

I shall possess, after this life, perfect blessedness, which no eye has seen nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, and thereby praise God forever.

The Roman Catholic tradition speaks of the 'beatific vision....the immediate knowledge of God which constitutes the primary felicity of Heaven. The souls of the blessed see God, directly, face to face.' In St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians and in the Book of Revelation, there are hints, illusions and promises of seeing and knowing God face to face. For the Orthodox tradition, life eternal is a participation in the very Being and life of God: they speak of a *theosis*, a deification. And to return to the Book of Revelation, the very last book in the Bible, in the penultimate chapter, we read:

God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more

death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.

In the faith narrative of Job, the central character comes face to face with God, confronted with the Holy One, the Creator of the universe, the cosmos, and he is humbled, he abhors himself and repents of his pride and arrogance and self-importance. But once in God's presence, Job becomes richer than ever. Do you believe in life after death? And, if so, what will it be like? Will our wrongs and brokenness and pain and tears be wiped away? Will we, as Fortman suggests, be able to move from planet to planet with great agility?

Again, if I may, I want to turn to the spiritual wisdom and learning of the saints, the giants of our tradition. Besides the personal dimension to life eternal, there is also the social and cosmic dimension. Gregory of Nanzianus took up the imagery of light and spoke of heaven as a 'perpetual festival, illuminated by the brightness of the Godhead of which here we can only catch fleeting glimpses, and it will be our joy to gaze on the Trinity of divine Persons.' In the Eastern Church, life eternal is more than personal, more than social: it is cosmic. The whole of nature is destined for glory.

In his book, *Why There Almost Certainly Is A God*, Keith Ward explores the source of this feeling, this intuition, this deep and mysterious sense that there is life after death. Ward writes:

Immortality is not a fiction invented to compensate for an unhappy life. It is the perception that our conscious lives are not bounded by this space and time, and that they find their fulfilment in union with a supreme spiritual reality that seems, even during this life, to take us beyond the limits of time.

Keith Ward is arguing that consciousness, my consciousness, your consciousness, is not necessarily dependent upon matter. Ward says, 'Perhaps materialism is the greater delusion.' Ward writes:

Consciousness is the most evident sort of existence there is, and it is not necessarily bound to matter....The delusion is that consciousness does not exist, or that it is wholly depends on matter. If we can establish affinity with God, then it is likely that such affinity can endure beyond the death of our physical bodies. It is because we have affinity with God that immortality becomes a possibility and a reasonable hope.

There's a thought to take home with you: perhaps materialism is the greater delusion. The story of the rich man who asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life is a story about what is inside a man, inside a human being, and the material world in which we live. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews says that God discerns the thoughts and intent of the heart. Jesus saw in the young man's heart the desire to purchase eternal life in much the same way he purchased everything else that he needed and wanted. If life eternal could be purchased in that way, then the heart would go on unchanged, impervious to the life and pain of others and insensitive to the Spirit of God. Perhaps materialism is the great delusion and that our consciousness is itself the evidence that we are

not bound to space and time, that we are made in the image of God, made for union and communion with the Holy One, the Eternal Mind and Consciousness.

David Read, the Scottish minister, who became Pastor at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, once said:

One of the reasons I believe in the Resurrection is that my mother told me. And to this day a strong element in my belief is the number and quality of people who told me.

I believe that we are made for life with God. What will it be like after death – a house with many mansions? It is a deep-rooted feeling or sensation in the soul that the spiritual, our consciousness, is the real and that the world of matter is less real. It is also a trust in Jesus: he has told us that in His Father's House are many mansions and He has gone to prepare a place for us. Trust in Jesus is rarely spontaneous; it is a growing trust over years in the One who comes to us, reaches out from the pages of Scripture.

Let me close with the meditative words of John Donne, the poet and priest.

Donne wrote:

I shall rise from the dead, from the darke station....and never misse the sunne, which shall then be put out, for I shall see the Sonne of God, the Sunne of glory, and shine my self, as that sunne shines. I shall rise from the grave, and never misse this City, which shall be no where, for I shall see the City of God, the new Jerusalem. I shall looke up, and never wonder when it will be day, for, the Angell will tell me that time shall be no more, and I shall see, and see cheerefully that last day,

the day of judgement, which shall have no night, never end, and be united to the Antient of dayes, to God himself, who had no morning, never began. There I shall bear witness for Christ.....

Belief in life after death, life eternal, has for me two roots: it is rooted in rational reflection on the fact of our consciousness, our spiritual consciousness; and it is rooted in trust in Jesus, the Man who comes to us in and through the pages of Scripture and the One we meet in the silence and darkness of prayer. Donne said, 'I shall rise from the dead, from the darke station....I shall rise from the grave....I shall looke up....and be united to....God himself.' It is not for nothing that the last line, the final clause, of the Apostles' Creed reads, 'I believe....in the life everlasting.' It is the purpose and climax of our faith's journey.

Amen.