

**Sermon**

Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> December, 2009

Lessons      Zephaniah 3: 14 – 20    Philippians 4: 4 – 7    St Luke 3: 7 – 18

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Set free, O Lord, the souls of Your servants from all restlessness and anxiety: grant us that peace and power that flow from You: keep us, embrace us, in all perplexity and distress; that, upheld by Your strength and stayed on the rock of Your faithfulness, we may abide in You now and evermore. Amen.

**St Paul wrote, ‘Rejoice in the Lord always.....Let your gentleness be known to all...The Lord is at hand. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.’**

*Philippians 4: 4 – 7 (abbrev.)*

On the Wednesday 12<sup>th</sup> of May, 1937 King George VI and Queen Elizabeth were crowned. On the Sunday evening before, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Cosmo Gordon Lang, went to Buckingham Palace for prayers with the King and Queen. Born in the manse of Fyvie, Lang was the son of a Kirk Minister. Within eighteen years of his ordination to the Anglican priesthood, he was Archbishop of Canterbury. In his diary of that evening in 1937, Lang wrote, ‘I prayed for them and for their realm and Empire, and I gave them my personal blessing. I was much moved, and so were they. Indeed there were tears in their eyes when we rose from our knees.’ On the day itself, many hundreds of thousands of people had turned out to see the Gold State Coach make its way to Westminster Abbey and there were many, many hundreds inside the Abbey itself, representatives from all over the world. The coronation was the first

outside live broadcast undertaken by the BBC. In the service itself, almost immediately after being crowned, the King and Queen received Holy Communion. The Queen Mother's biographer, William Shawcross, said:

Together, the King and Queen then removed their crowns and received Holy Communion, probably the most moving and sacred moment of the tumultuous day for them both.<sup>1</sup>

On the evening of the Coronation, sometime after the King had made his live television broadcast from the Palace, the Queen wrote to the Archbishop. She said:

I write to you with a very full heart...I was moved, & more helped than I could have believed possible. It is curious, on thinking it over now, that I was not conscious of there being anybody else there at the Communion – you told us last Sunday evening that we would be helped and we were sustained & carried above the ordinary fear of a great ceremony.<sup>2</sup>

With many hundreds of thousands outside the Abbey and the many hundreds attending the service inside, the Queen wrote, 'I was not conscious of there being anybody else there at the Communion.' St Paul wrote, 'By prayer...the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds...' Did anyone imagine that amidst such a ceremony, with all the thought and organisation that went into it, and all the accompanying anxiety and tension of the day itself should something go wrong, that there would be at the

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<sup>1</sup> William Shawcross, Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother p403

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p404

centre of it a moment of immeasurable stillness, of eternal peace, a palpable sense of eternity present in time?

Another story. St Hugh's Charterhouse, Parkminster, is described as the most rigorous and ascetic monastic order in the Western world. In her book, *An Infinity of Little Hours*, Nancy Maguire had the opportunity to hear the stories of five of the young men who left the world outside to enter the solitude and hermit like life in the monastery. One Brother, Dom Philip, whose name before his solemn profession had been David, told the story of being visited by a friend, just days before he took his final vows. Dom Philip told his friend that the graveyard at the monastery made sense of life. He explained:

Last Thursday, around 2pm, I went by an open cloister door and looked out. The cross in the centre of the graveyard was right in front of me, about fifteen yards away. The graveyard gives you the best sense of the place – for seeing all of the Charterhouse, the church behind, the garth, all the cells. The Charterhouse came into focus for me. As I stood there, with the afternoon sun hitting the wooden crosses that mark the graves, I thought, there is only now and death. There is nothing else, *hic et hunc*. And, as a monk, every day I am deliberately moving toward death. The monastic structure keeps me focused on what my life is about.<sup>3</sup>

Dom Philip then told his friend of the troubles he had with other monks in the choir. His friend looked at Dom Philip, hesitated, then asked, 'Dave, if you're unhappy, why do you stay?' Dom Philip replied, 'I've come here to be alone with God, and I'll pay the price....Only those who have experienced the solitude

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<sup>3</sup> Nancy Klein Maguire *An Infinity of Little Hours* p213

and silence of the wilderness can know what benefit and divine joy they bring to those who love them.’ Dom Philip spoke of being along with God and of the benefit and divine joy which the solitude and silence of the wilderness can bring. We may be neither monk nor monarch but the eternal silence of God, the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will, through prayer and supplication, guard our hearts and minds. With patience, practice and persistence, with devotion, study and learning, peace is there for each one of us to taste. The peace of God, which Jesus said is like no other, is the summit, the pinnacle, of life in the Church.

There is a wonderful story told of an elderly woman who lived in Glasgow. She was a member of Govan Old in the 1930s at the time George MacLeod was minister. The elderly woman was now housebound and unable to attend worship. However, on one Sunday the BBC service broadcast the weekly service from her church. With deep joy, she listened to the worship: the hymns, the readings and the eloquence of MacLeod himself in prayers and preaching. Later, when asked by her Elder what she had enjoyed most about the service, she said she had enjoyed most what she had always enjoyed about worship in Govan: to hear her minister bless the people. Seated in front of her fire, with head bowed, she heard MacLeod end the service with the words:

The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, keep  
your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God,

and of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord; and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be amongst you, and remain with you always.

In her tenement flat, behind closed doors, in solitude and silence, in prayer, she experienced the peace of God.

The peace of God is a gift to us. It is true that in life and in prayer we feel nothing of God. Existentially, we find ourselves in the present moment with nothing on either side, nothing but darkness and the abyss. At times, we may feel that there is only the now, the present moment, and nothing, absolutely nothing beyond that and that when we die we cease to be as if we had never existed. And yet, there are times when we feel the nearness of God, a nearness which presents itself as the most real thing in our life, in the world and the universe.

I believe that it comes down to empathy and compassion. Empathy is the ability to enter into the world of others so that we can experience what they feel *as if* we were them without losing the *as if* quality. It is change on the inside which makes visible change on the outside possible. The peace of God is a medicine of the soul which we need; we need it for ourselves, for our own health and salvation. But the peace of God not only brings calmness, patience, insight, reflection and a deeper hunger for God: it also brings empathy – and empathy unavoidably opens our souls to the pain and suffering of others. It is

from this deep sense of personal peace that the prophets rose up to preach about God's justice and stand up for the poor and the most vulnerable.

Dr Sheila Cassidy worked for many years with those who were terminally ill and later became a palliative care physician in Plymouth. Some years earlier, she worked in Chile. She is a well-known writer and something of an authority on pastoral care. She said:

I believe that the most important route to a knowledge of God, a working theology, is through prayer. We can read all the pious books in the world, but unless we sit silently at God's feet, open our minds and hearts to him, we will never really know him. This knowing, of course, is not an ordinary knowing. I don't know God like I know my boss, or my best friend....Like R S Thomas, I meet him mostly in his absences, entering rooms which he has just left, finding his prints on the dew-covered grass, or glimpsing him as he slips away between the trees. Forgive me if I resort to poetic imagery: it's the only language I know for talking about God. I know God as faithful, because in my relationship with him he has been faithful to me. I know him as shepherd because he has somehow held my elbow as I have walked terrified along the edges of ravines. I have met him in a Chilean retreat house when I gave him my life as a blank cheque, and then in solitary confinement when I almost took it back. I 'know him' in the way of unknowing prayer and by realising how he has been present in the crooked trajectory of my life....If you are someone who prays you will know what I mean, and if you aren't, perhaps you should try.<sup>4</sup>

Cassidy's recurring experience and my experience is that the more we place ourselves in the presence of the Eternal Spirit, the Holy One, the deeper will be the peace we experience in our souls. In turn, the greater will be our potential to empathise with the pain, suffering and injustice suffered by others. Being

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<sup>4</sup> Sheila Cassidy *Light from the Dark Valley* p105

conscious each day of the Presence of the Living, loving God is a transforming experience. If it wasn't, then we would not be here and neither would this building.

Amen.