

Sermon

Sunday 14th February, 2010

Lessons Exodus 34: 29 – 35 2 Corinthians 3: 12 – 4: 2 St Luke 9: 28 – 43

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

O Lord our God, since it has pleased You to make Your will known by Your Holy Word; grant us to receive Your Word with meekness and to feel its power; that thereby we may be transformed into the likeness of Christ Jesus, Your Son our Saviour. Amen.

This week, after many years, I read once again Joseph Conrad's disturbing novel *Heart of Darkness*. It is a reflection on the human condition. Conrad's tale is set in the late Victorian period when the colonial powers were at their height and when confidence in *our* Western civilisation was at its peak. *Heart of Darkness* is deeply disturbing because it confronts us with an impenetrable darkness at the heart of all things. The book is narrated by the principal character, Marlow. Marlow had been the captain of a steamboat belonging to a French trading society. He recounts a voyage down the Congo River, into the heart of Africa, the Dark Continent, to one of the trading stations run by a German man called Kurtz. In his novel, Conrad is working towards the realisation that the heart of immense darkness does not lie in some geographical location, such as the centre of the African continent, but in the beat of every single human heart, in the soul itself.

Before Marlow recounts his story of the voyage on the Congo River, he contrasts the imperial expansion of the late nineteenth century with that of the

Roman conquests two thousand years earlier. Marlow asks the reader to sympathise with the Roman commander sent to Britain:

Imagine him here – the very end of the world, the sea the colour of lead, a sky the colour of smoke, a kind of ship about as rigid as a concertina – and going up this river with stores, or orders, or what you like. Sandbanks, marshes, forests, savages – precious little to eat fit for a civilised man, nothing but Thames water to drink. No Falernian wine here, no going ashore. Here and there a military camp lost in a wilderness, like a needle in a bundle of hay – cold, fog, tempests, disease, exile, and death – death skulking in the air, in the water, in the bush. They must have been dying like flies here.¹

Conrad was writing against a backdrop of reports in the press and a public perception that Africa represented primitive nature and pure unmitigated savagery. In sailing up the Congo, Marlow spoke of ‘travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings.’ Marlow worked with cannibals. Of them he said:

Fine fellows – cannibals – in their place. They were men one could work with, and I am grateful to them. And, after all, they did not eat each other before my face: they had brought along a provision of hippo-meat which went rotten, and made the mystery of the wilderness stink in my nostrils.²

It is when Conrad’s Marlow finally reaches his destination that the heart of darkness is exposed for all to see. It is in Marlow’s reflection on the life of Kurtz, who ran the trading station, that we see the poverty, emptiness and meaninglessness of human life. Kurtz exploited the African continent and used all kinds of methods, persuasion, bribery and violence to obtain ivory. Kurtz

¹ Joseph Conrad *Heart of Darkness* 106

² *Ibid.*, 138

collected more ivory than all the other trading stations put together: he was the epitome of individual success in imperial expansion and exploration. Conrad wrote, ‘Kurtz lacked restraint in gratification of his various lusts.’³ In Marlow as well as in Kurtz, a realisation dawns upon them that it has been their forgotten and brutal instincts and their gratified and monstrous passions which had brought them to Africa and had exposed the savagery of their own civilisation. Kurtz had been inspired by the ambitions and self-confidence of the greatest civilisations in the history of humanity and he was among their highest achievers; with a reputation the envy of thousands, but through his characters, Marlow and Kurtz, Conrad wrote of the heart of darkness.

At the end of the book, Kurtz dies. Of Kurtz’s final moments, Marlow said:

His was an impenetrable darkness. I looked at him as you peer down at a man who is lying at the bottom of a precipice where the sun never shines.

.....

Anything approaching the change that came over his features I have never seen before, and hope never to see again. Oh, I wasn’t touched. I was fascinated. It was as though a veil had been rent. I saw on that ivory face the expression of sombre pride, of ruthless power, of craven terror – of an intense and hopeless despair. Did he live his life again in every detail of desire, temptation, and surrender during that supreme moment of complete knowledge? He cried in a whisper at some image, at some vision, - he cried out twice, a cry that was no more than a breath – ‘The horror! The horror!’⁴

³ *ibid.*, 164

⁴ *ibid.*, 177f

What was the vision or image which caught his attention? In his final moments, was he disgusted at how he had lived his life? Did he deem horrible the inner nature of humanity and stare penetratingly into the hearts that beat in the darkness? Was it the entire universe which he loathed? Conrad's book, *Heart of Darkness*, presents us with reality or reality as he sees it. Life is brutal, immoral, shallow, empty and devoid of light. We may believe we are the best the earth has ever seen but, says Conrad, scratch beneath the surface and we are no more than savages. There is nothing more: no Eternal Mind, higher Morality, or beneficent Providence or, if there is, it is hidden in an impenetrable darkness, invisible to the point of being irrelevant in this life. In a mesmerised state, Kurtz cried out, 'The horror! The horror!'

The late nineteenth century is a period of rising atheism from which the Church has never recovered. Conrad wrote of the darkness in which we live and which lies at the heart of our existence. The poet, James Thomson, penned these memorable lines:

And now at last authentic word I bring,
Witnessed by every deed and living thing;
Good tidings of great joy for you, for all:
There is no God; no Fiend with names divine
Made us and tortures us; if we must pine,
It is to satiate no Being's gall.

.....

This little life, is all we must endure,

The grave's most holy place is ever sure,
We fall asleep and never wake again;
Nothing is of us but the mouldering flesh,
Whose elements dissolve and merge afresh
In earth, air, water, planets, and other men.

Very often, too often, the reason poets, writers and scientists have attacked theology, the Church and God is because of the shameful witness of Christian thought and action. Though the Reformation was necessary and, in so many ways, an intellectual leap forward and a liberation, the ferocity with which Christians opposed each other cast doubt on the worth of the gospel itself. The censorship of religious authorities towards scientific theory and discovery has provoked the aggression of the scientific community. Today, the divisions and bitterness between and within denominations is a good reason, a very good reason, not to go to church. The pope's invitation to Anglican clergy disaffected over the ordination of women is unhelpful, if not malicious. And, I believe, that because so many Christians espouse a faith, a theology, which is little more than superstition, many people as a result would never dream of attending worship. That we are here today is remarkable: we have had to overcome so many obstacles to make this trip, this pilgrimage, worth the effort. That intelligent, rational faith is possible in the twenty-first century is miraculous.

Used wisely, Holy Scripture is a beacon for us. It is a window; it lets in light.

The faith narratives of the Old and New Testaments are eloquent meditations.

The Scottish preacher, the late H R McIntosh, said that:

To collect one's spirit and pray with energy, with intensity, with persistence, may without exaggeration be called the most absorbing, and in a very real sense the most exhausting action of which the human mind is capable.

In the mind of our hearts, our consciousness, with the power of imagination, we encounter the Holy One. We know God in our personal story. The faith we feel needs to be filtered through reason before it becomes sensible theology but, in different ways, we have felt God in our lives – of that, we need no persuading. As we approach our Scripture this morning we do so as always with the hope and expectation that we will hear the voice of God in it.

Scripture records the shining face of Moses having been to the mountain top; his face radiating light having contemplated and looked into the Mystery of God, and undoubtedly having seen Love. Like Moses, it is in prayer that Jesus is said to radiate the light of God. He must have prayed for a very long time, perhaps hours, because the disciples had time to fall into a very deep sleep.

The Gospel states that Peter and the other disciples were heavy with sleep but when they were fully awake in the mind of their hearts they saw and heard the voice of God in Jesus. Their moment of spiritual intimacy with Jesus was such that they did not wish to leave: 'Master, it is good for us to be here.' In his Second Letter to the Corinthians, St Paul wrote of seeing the glory of God in

Jesus which he himself experienced in his heart. However intellectually open we are to the world around us, however damaging certain theologies can be and however deep the suffering of the world, we must with greater conviction trust in the God who has brought us to this sanctuary, whose Presence we have felt in moments past and who we believe will go with us when we leave here.

Let me close with this: in his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, the psychiatrist, Viktor Frankl, tells the story of his struggle for survival in Auschwitz and other Nazi concentration camps. Frankl said that despite the enforced mental and physical primitiveness of the camps, it was possible for spiritual life to deepen. On one early morning march, with the commands ringing in his ears, 'Left -2-3-4!' 'Caps off!', slipping on the ice, the biting wind on his face and ears, he 'looked up at the sky where the stars were fading and the pink light of the morning was beginning to spread' and began to think of his wife. From the heart of darkness that was Auschwitz, Frankl said this:

My mind clung to my wife's image, imagining it with uncanny acuteness. I heard her answering me, saw her smile, her frank and encouraging look. Real or not, her look was more luminous than the sun which was beginning to rise.

A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth – that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: The salvation of man is through love and in love. I understood how a man who has nothing left in the world still may know bliss, be it only

for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved.....

For the first time in my life I was able to understand the meaning of the words, ‘The angels are lost in perpetual contemplation of an infinite glory.’⁵

There is savagery in the world, potential brutality in human nature and there is atheism and materialism and meaninglessness all around, but in the mind of his heart, Viktor Frankl saw a light brighter than the sun. Marching in sub-zero temperatures in one of the darkest places on earth, Frankl saw a light shine and understood the perpetual contemplation of the angels. For a fleeting moment, he was transfigured by the Light of God, so much so that he could say, ‘A man who has nothing may know bliss.’

Amen.

⁵ Viktor E Frankl Man’s Search for Meaning 47f