

Sermon

Sunday 18th October, 2009

Lessons

Job 38: 1 – 7, 34 – 41

St Mark 10: 35 – 45

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Gracious God and most merciful Father, who has vouchsafed us the rich and precious jewel of Your holy word: assist us with Your Spirit that it may be written in our hearts to our everlasting comfort, to reform us, to renew us according to Your own image, to build us up into the perfect building of Your Christ, and to increase us in all heavenly virtues. Grant this, O heavenly Father, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

**The LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said,
‘Who is this who darkens counsel by words without knowledge?’**

Job 38: 1 – 2

What do you make of the quotation on the front cover of the Order of Service?

These are the words of the German philosopher, Hegel. Like many thinkers and saints before him, Hegel was attempting to put into words what he believed God to be, to encapsulate the nature of God in philosophical thought. What he is saying in this quotation is that God is the only thing that is real because God is the only thing that does not depend on anything else for its existence. God, he wrote, is absolute substance, the only true actuality. Everything else, everything in the cosmos, in this world, right down to our consciousness, has no subsistence, is not actual: God is the absolute substance. It is clever stuff.

The biblical writers did not express God in quite the same way. They were more heavily dependent upon story and mythological imagery. In the Book of Job, when God finally appears before Job, we read, ‘The LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind...’ You will remember that when the word ‘LORD’

(written in capitals) appears in the English text of the Bible what lies behind that word is the tetragrammaton. The tetragrammaton is the four letters for the name of God, YHWH. With the vowels 'a' and 'e', the name is pronounced *Yahweh* but the vowels are taken out because to be able to name something is to have power over it; it is to define it. That is a chair: you have named it and defined it. With God, it is quite different. God is beyond naming, beyond definition and God appears to Job out of a whirlwind. Whirlwinds, storms, in a literal sense demonstrated both the presence and the power of God, the immense power of God. Whirlwinds, storms, in a literary sense were theophanies, images writers were able to use which enabled them to have God speak while, at the same time, remain out of sight, beyond naming, beyond definition. The LORD, *Yahweh*, answered Job out of the whirlwind.

In the New Testament, in the narrative of the Transfiguration, God speaks on a hillside, to Jesus and the disciples: the entire hillside is ablaze with light and there is one spot of darkness, one corner which the light does not penetrate, one cloud in the sky: it is from the cloud that the voice of God comes. On first reading, biblical passages can, at times without care, be read as though God is present in the same manner as we are to one another or that God speaks in the same manner as we do to each other, and God can appear to be but one character or player among many. The texts are much deeper than that: the LORD, the Holy One, the One whose name cannot be uttered, answered Job,

made His presence felt and purposes known to Job, all the while remaining in the darkness, beyond human comprehension, behind the image. When we think of God we have to think big, or maybe it is better to say that when it comes to describing God we should not say anything. Perhaps when it comes to the absolute substance as Hegel called Him, the One reality or actuality that is not dependent on anything, we should remain silent.....perhaps.

What kind of experience might the character Job have had when God answered him? What does it mean to have God speak to us? Even the word 'speak' is a metaphor. The Liverpool poet, Brian Patten, wrote a poem entitled, *Remembering Snow*. If you like, close your eyes, listen to these lines, and enjoy them:

I did not sleep last night,
The falling snow was beautiful and white.
I dressed, sneaked down the stairs
And opened wide the door.
I had not seen such snow before.
Our grubby little street had gone;
The world was brand-new, and everywhere
There was a pureness in the air.
I felt such peace. Watching every flake
I felt more and more awake.
I thought I'd learned all there was to know
About the trillion million different kinds
Of swirling frosty flakes of snow.
But that was not so.
I did not know how vividly it lit
The world with such a peaceful glow.
Upstairs my mother slept.
I could not drag myself away from that sight

To call her down and have her share
The mute miracle of the snow.
It seemed to fall for me alone.
How beautiful the grubby little street had grown!

Patten said,

Poets, when they set out to write a poem, very seldom know the outcome in advance. Often it's a feeling they are trying to capture, and, if they are lucky, the right words simply pour down as a gift from Heaven.

The right words simply pour down as a gift from Heaven. I wonder if the faith narrative we know as the Book of Job is not in fact just that: a deep, thoughtful meditation on the nature of God, on the existence of good and evil, righteousness and suffering; a gift from Heaven.

In this gift from Heaven, which you know is the oldest book in the Bible, God answers Job. Job has been complaining about the injustices and evil which he has suffered. Without a whiff of pastoral sensitivity, the LORD says to Job, 'Who is this who darkens counsel by words without knowledge?' As an aside, Eric Milner-White, a former Dean of York Minster, once said, 'Language has a part too little regarded in worship: to exalt, or to vulgarize it.' Listen to the New King James Version, 'The LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said, 'Who is this who darkens counsel by words without knowledge?' This single verse from the most ancient of books presents us with a theology and way of speaking about God which has integrity today: the Holy One, whose name can never be said, who is hidden within the whirlwind, asks a question of Job, a

question pertinent to humanity, ‘Who are you to question Me?’ Who is this who darkens counsel by words without knowledge?’ I certainly feel that when we come before God, when we present ourselves to God, in private or in a sanctuary, a space set apart for that use and mystery, we should do so with the greatest of care and respect, and mindful of our size and limitations.

And yet, however much God is above and beyond us that concept or understanding is not adequate. It is not adequate because too many people throughout history, too many people living today, too many people in this gathering have felt and do feel God to be present, powerful in their lives and bestowing of purpose. However much it is right to accept the need to think of God within the whirlwind and behind the cloud, God is known and reveals Himself in and through persons. God may not be a person but He is a personal God. The nineteenth century Scottish theologian, John Caird said:

Men sometimes speak as if our belief in Christ were a thing that stands or falls with the proof of the authenticity of ancient documents, and the demonstrated historic accuracy or the extant records of Christ’s earthly life.....But our faith in the Christ they reveal rests, I believe, on a more impregnable foundation than historic tradition – [it rests] on the inward witness of a spiritual presence here and now, which we can realise more profoundly than when men looked on the face and listened to the voice of Jesus of Nazareth – the inward witness to the presence of that redeeming, purifying, hallowing Spirit that was incarnate in Him, and that is still and for ever living not only *for* us, but *in* us, and in all who open their spirits to its life-giving power.

Rightly we defend the incomprehensibility and elusiveness of God but, paradoxically, we can and need to speak of the God whom we know *personally*, in a personal and intimate sense.

When I read our Gospel lesson in preparation for today what struck me, as I reflected on it, was the unassuming, quiet acceptance on the part of the disciples that Jesus would sit in glory in Heaven and that He would be there to greet them. The disciples, James and John, say to Jesus, ‘Grant us that we may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on Your left, in Your glory.’ Too readily we pass on to the quarrel that follows with the other disciples and then to that great saying of Jesus, ‘Whoever of you desires to be first shall be the slave of all.’ But what I noticed, what I heard, was the assurance and confidence of the disciples that Jesus would be in Heaven and that he would wait for them, ready to greet them. The God of the universe, the absolute substance, was in Christ, spoke through Christ and revealed Himself as a personal God. Jesus sits in glory, waits for us and will greet each of us.

The Dominican friar, Timothy Radcliffe, writes:

What is the point of being a Christian? We must begin to answer this question by asking whether there is any point in anything at all. Are our lives shaped by some ultimate goal that gives them meaning or not? Christianity is either an attempt to answer this most fundamental question or it is nothing.

It is so sad that religion and Christianity get such a bad press these days because faith and matters of faith are at the cutting edge, the coal face, at the very edge of the abyss, of what it means to be human, what it means to be alive, what it means to live by values and why is it that we are here at all? Is there anything more stimulating or real than faith and the pursuit of the incomprehensible, elusive and personal God?

Amen.