

Sermon

Sunday 20th September 2009

Lessons

Jeremiah 11: 18 – 20; 12: 1 - 6

St Mark 9: 30 – 37

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Father in Heaven, who shows the plenitude of Your grace to those that are humble, who reverence Your Word; speak to our hearts, to teach, cleanse, guide and comfort us. Give us grace to receive Your Word with humility, to revere and obey it; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The prophet Jeremiah wrote, ‘I was like a docile lamb brought to the slaughter; and I did not know that they had devised schemes against me, saying, ‘Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, and let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name be remembered no more.’ And, the prophet asks God, ‘Why does the way of the wicked prosper?’ Jeremiah is talking about the hardships which he has faced but his words are also on behalf of the people of Israel. The Babylonian Empire has crushed the Jewish tribes, the Temple imagined by David and built by Solomon, has been destroyed. The prophet asks God, ‘Why does the way of the wicked prosper?’ To God, the prophet asks, ‘Why do the other nations succeed and we suffer and are broken?’ ‘What kind of God are you?’ Israel, says the prophet, has been led like a docile lamb to the slaughter and where is God? The enemies of Israel have said, ‘Let us destroy them and cut them off from the land of the living, that their name be remembered no more.’ The city has been plundered, the walls torn down, the Temple destroyed and the leaders and many of the people have been captured and

enslaved by the Babylonians. These events took place in 587BC, over two and a half thousand years ago, but the people and the prophet ask a very human question: ‘Why does wickedness prosper and where is God in our suffering?’ ‘We have worshipped You,’ the people and prophet say, ‘and where are You now?’

In 30AD, towards the end of his public ministry, Jesus predicts his death. He told his disciples, ‘The Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill Him.’ Here, in Jesus, we have the fullest and most complete expression of God in humanity: He was the Word made flesh, and He told His disciples, ‘I am to be betrayed, handed over to the wicked, and I shall be killed.’ Why is it that the wicked prosper? Why do faithful people suffer? If Jesus may be called the most faithful human to walk the earth suffered at the hands of the wicked, who will be free from suffering? Where is God and what kind of God is this? Only the crudest theology would say that God planned the death of His Son, planned it as a substitutionary atonement, a just satisfaction for the wrongs God had suffered at the hands of humanity: that theology is immoral. No, Jesus stood against the Temple authorities, he stood against Rome; he opposed the oppression of the poor and the powerless. He was executed for insurrection, for a crime against the state. Why do the wicked prosper and the poor, the faithful, suffer? Where is God and what kind of God is this?

Bad theology, however well-intentioned, is undoubtedly one of the reasons why people leave the Church and why some never enter its sanctuaries. This week I was amused by the hysterical rant of Matthew Parris in *The Times*. Parris was commenting, vehemently I may say, on the arrival of the relics of St Thérèse. Thousands of ‘pilgrims’ have already journeyed to the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Portsmouth to see the relics before they are moved on to the next of twenty-eight other sites. Pilgrims lit candles and touched the Perspex casing in which the relics lay, the relics being a thigh and foot bone. Matthew Parris wrote, ‘Atheists, come out and fight these nutters.’ Parris wrote, ‘Pilgrims?’ Isn’t the word ‘dupes?’ ‘Would a conference of the Flat Earth Society get giggle-free treatment on the news?’ With great passion, he wrote:

How can bishops sanction this paganistic nonsense? I had been wondering whether Richard Dawkins’s critics were right to complain that his atheism was intolerant; whether we atheists were wrong to rage with such certitude about what is really only an absence of belief. But these relics have performed a miracle: they have re-inspired in me a fiery conviction. We non-believers must rage, insist, proclaim.

Closet atheists of Britain, come out! Don’t ‘respect’ this credulous folly! Don’t let the madnesses of these faith communities go by default! Stop our politicians kowtowing to nutters!

Agnosticism is not enough.

Bad theology almost always pushes people away from the Church. Calvin had no time for relics; he believed them to be idolatry. He famously scoffed that there were enough pieces of the Cross on which Jesus died to build a ship! If

only Matthew Parris had taken the time to find out just a little background information on St Thérèse, he may not have been so eager to rant. Within the Roman Catholic tradition, St Thérèse is the patron saint of sufferers of AIDS and she is not that for nothing. In her spiritual writing, she states:

Love proves itself by deeds, so how am I to show my love? Great deeds are forbidden me. The only way I can prove my love is by scattering flowers and these flowers are every little sacrifice, every glance and word, and the doing of the least actions for love.

Through the simplest of actions, she sought to bring beauty and peace into the lives of those who suffered. In a world of self-interest, cynicism and relativism, she is worthy of our attention. Sometimes criticized of being too child-like, she wrote:

For me, prayer, is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward Heaven; it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy; in a word, something noble, supernatural, which enlarges my soul and unites it to God.... I have not the courage to look through books for beautiful prayers.... I do as a child who has not learned to read, I just tell our Lord all that I want and He understands.

In this case, it is quite easy to dismiss the rant of Matthew Parris: he has not sought to enquire after the values she lived by and how it is a decent thing to celebrate those values. Nor has he understood that, for some, being close to the relics will bring to mind and heart in a more intense and personal way the communal memory and example of the saint. Is it not the case that a home, a room, a place or an artefact of some kind can bring to mind the memory of a

loved one now deceased? Why not a relic for those who have cherished the faithful witness of the saint? Parris is right, however, to challenge any theology which indicates that the relics in themselves possess supernatural powers. That is pagan and superstitious. From bad theology, Parris leaps to atheism. Like Ovid, he argues, 'I am disposed to think that there are no gods.'

Bad theology does take people away from the Church. We need a theological outlook which is not superstitious, not looking for supernatural miracles and which takes seriously the reality of the world in which we live. In this world, God did not prevent the exile of the Jews from Jerusalem in 587BC, He did not save Jesus from the Roman authorities, He did not stop the Holocaust, He did not prevent 9/11 and He is not intervening to stop climate change. We need to have a way of thinking about God which makes sense of the world life we actually are required to live, which then helps us to pray in ways which are most appropriate and not to spend our time asking for the wrong things. Jeremiah asks for himself and the Jewish people, 'Why do the wicked succeed? Why do Your people suffer? What kind of God are You?' And Jesus said, 'The Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of men, and He will be killed.' We cannot reflect on these questions often enough because it is our continual temptation to hope and pray for a God of magic miracles! We know that He did not stop the Holocaust but we are secretly hoping that He will intervene to solve our little problem.

This week I revisited the book, *To Travel Hopefully*, written by Christopher Rush. In it, Rush reflects on the death of his wife and his journey back to life from that event. In the footsteps of Robert Louis Stevenson, he travelled to Cévennes and to the Trappist monastery of Notre Dame des Neiges. He was welcomed by the monks, attended their daily cycle of services – Vigils for an hour before dawn, meditation and reading till 7am, Lauds and the Eucharist, Terce before morning chores, two other offices of worship, Vespers at 6.30pm and Compline at 8.00pm. While there, Rush met a philosopher called Pierre. Pierre told Rush:

Time will heal you, in spite of what you say now...Time cures grief because in ten years from now you will no longer be the same person. So it's not the grief that dies – it goes away with the other person you once were. The offended can eventually forgive the offender because neither is the same person after a time. It's like nations coming together after two generations when they've been at war.....That's why people in love get divorced ten years on. Neither is the same human being. The chances are that they are always likely to change in different directions, not together, as there are so many directions possible for a human being. Only if there has been what your Shakespeare calls a marriage of true minds in the first place will they then evolve together, in harmony. That's very rare.

One of the monks, who was party to this conversation, said that belief in God was the ultimate leap of human imagination and that, while imagination needed an abundance of fuel to keep the mind racing, faith was able to keep running even when there was no longer any reason to believe. The monk said of death:

Every man has his fears, whether he is a monk or a man of the world. For the monk death is the bell which calls him to meet God, and that meeting is what monastic life has been all about and what it leads up to. The monk sees death not as a rupture with life but as the door that leads to the true life.

Death in the abstract simply does not exist.

After the discussion, it was time for Compline. Rush filed into the chapel. His experience that night had been no different from that of RLS just over one hundred years earlier. Stevenson had written:

The plain whitewashed chapel, the hooded figures in the choir, the lights alternately occluded and revealed, the strong, manly singing, the silence, the sight of cowled heads bowed in prayer, and the clear trenchant beating of the bell, breaking in to show that the last office was over and the hour of sleep had come; these things had a flavour and a significance that cannot be rendered in words. Only to the faithful can this be made clear, to one like myself...

Rush admits that when he had arrived at the monastery he was sick in body and soul and that when he left he felt infinitely refreshed in both. Rush had benefited enormously from the philosophical discussions with the other visitors and with the monks. He had not found direct answers to his direct questions, questions no less piercing than those of Jeremiah, but in the monastery he found peace and spiritual comfort in the otherness of the sacred space, the ancient worship and the devotion of the monks.

So long as Matthew Parris rants, so long as he is listening more to his own voice than to the insights and wisdom of others, the wisdom of generations, he will

not hear the still, small voice of God. Venerating a decayed thigh and foot bone or harbouring expectations of great and dramatic, not to mention personal, interventions in life is not very helpful either. People of faith can sometimes be very silly and superstitious. The next time you are tempted to ask for a small intervention remember the exile of the Jewish nation and the destruction of their Temple, remember Jesus was killed by Rome and that there was a holocaust and 9/11. But remember also that God is everything, everywhere, and if we avail ourselves of Him He will lightly, mysteriously and imperceptibly bring a flavour and significance into our lives that cannot be rendered in words.

Amen.