

Sermon

Sunday 29th November, 2009

Lessons 1 Thessalonians 3: 9 – 13

St Luke 21: 25 – 36

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Break forth new light, O Lord, from out of Your Holy Word; and when we cannot see the way before us, let Your Word be a lamp to our feet; so that we, being secure from the power of darkness, may pass through this world in peace and safety. Grant this for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Jesus said, 'But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly....Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man.'

St Luke 21: 34-36

The fourteenth century mystic Meister Eckhart said, 'The soul is naked before all things that bear names.' To this the Canadian spiritual writer, Philip Newell, adds, 'The soul is neither Jewish nor Christian, neither Muslim nor Hindu. It defies the limitation of any one tradition.' Eckhart said, 'The soul is naked before all things that bear names.' Listen to the profound words of R S Thomas:

Moments of great calm,
Kneeling before an altar
Of wood in a stone church
In summer, waiting for God
To speak; the air a staircase
For silence; the sun's light
Ringing me, as though I acted
A great rôle. And the audiences
Still; all that close throng
Of spirits waiting, as I,
For the message.

Prompt me, God;
But not yet. When I speak,
Though it be you who speak
Through me, something is lost.
The meaning is in the waiting.

Throughout the Christian season of Advent, the liturgical colour of which is purple, we are encouraged to reflect on the coming of Christ into the world.

Wearing Christ-shaped spectacles, we can look back through the Scriptures of the Old Testament to identify the texts which tell of Christ's coming:

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light.....

For unto us a Child is born,
Unto us a Son is given;
And the government will be upon His shoulder.
And His name will be called Wonderful,
Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace.

That ancient prophecy and others like it form the backdrop for the first coming of Christ into the world, the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. The wise men journeyed hundreds of miles and the hosts of the heavenly choir sang above the shepherds on the hillside.

Advent is also the season when we think of Christ coming again into the world, His return: the Second Coming:

And there will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and
in the stars; and on the earth distress of nations, with
perplexity, the sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts

failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

Then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.

There is so much drama associated with Advent: apocalyptic visions abound.

W B Yeats wrote, ‘Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world....Surely some revelation is at hand; Surely the Second Coming is at hand.’ I suppose one would expect the most gigantic claims to be made or the grandest mythology to surround the moment and manner in which God visibly comes to earth.

There is a third meaning to Advent and that is to bring to mind once again the coming of God into our own hearts, into our lives. God comes to us and comes again. He stands at the door and knocks. Too often the biblical imagery of God coming into the world and into the lives of individuals is a barrier to people experiencing God in their hearts. The choir of angels and the Son of Man coming in a cloud of power and great glory is mythology too often read literally. It is the same with the account of the conversion of St Paul on the road to Damascus: a light from heaven shone around him. This is the language of faith narrative but God *comes* to us and comes again. He stands at the door and knocks. The writer, Richard Griffiths, tells us:

It is all summed up by the words of Psalm 46: ‘Be still, and know that

I am God.’ Knowledge of God comes, not through intellectual arguments, or precise reasoning. It comes through the *experience* of God. And that experience, that knowledge, comes through calmness, stillness, receptiveness, trust. We must try not to be too ‘busy’ in our approaches to God. We must lay ourselves open to his presence.¹

The Benedictine monk, Dom David Foster, writes about the five fingers of prayer. The five fingers are asking things of God for ourselves, for others, thanking Him, saying sorry to Him and praising Him. David Foster says:

The weakest fingers were for asking for people or things (me, on the last finger, being shorter than my neighbour on the fourth.) Thanksgiving was on the middle and longest finger; it was the kind of prayer there should be most of. The index finger was for pointing, not to blame others but to acknowledge my own fault. This was the prayer of confession and contrition. The thumb, which can stand alone from the other fingers, was for God himself, the prayer of adoration and praise.

Foster says:

There was a Chinese proverb that we are all born with our hands closed: the whole art of life consists in learning to open them. In the same way, the five fingers of prayer help us open the palms of our hands to give ourselves as an offering to God and to receive the gifts he wants to give.

David Foster also talks about moving from prayers to prayer, from words to silence, from *me* to the Presence. R S Thomas said that the meaning is in the waiting. It is true that we can have services of worship in this or any sanctuary at which there is no preaching; the preaching is left out. But there can never be a service of worship in which prayer is omitted. A sanctuary is first and foremost a House of Prayer.

¹ Richard Griffiths *Poetry and Prayer* p7f

Last week I met a young man who gave up his career as a doctor to become a monk. He said that he came to realise that he was more interested in healing the soul than the body. He said, as only a doctor could, ‘I have looked inside many bodies laid out on table and I know that I am so much more than this physical stuff that I can see.’ The Swiss theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote of the soul, the sinner and prayer. He said:

Man is the being who bears in his heart a mystery greater than himself. He is like a tabernacle erected round a sacred mystery.....

It is true that, in the sinner, this sanctuary has become neglected and forgotten, overgrown and turned into a sepulchre or a rubbish-heap. It needs much effort, the effort in fact of contemplative prayer, to clear it out and make it suitable for its heavenly guest. But the place itself does not have to be built. It is there already, in the inmost part of man, and always has been.

What a wonderfully helpful image: humanity, men and women, you and me, are tabernacles erected around the sacred mystery. Within each of us, there dwells the sacred mystery of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit: the Divine Presence and Word burning within us. Prayer, then, is not to be thought of so much as all our effort up towards God but rather as God reaching out to God. It is the Holy Spirit that prays within us and leads our thoughts Godward. The Jewish poet, Bialik, said of the first creation narrative in Genesis that God created the Sabbath only after He created humanity. The Sabbath is longer than twenty four hours because the Jews do not want to let go of the *Shekinah*, the Presence of God: that day of rest, that calmness, that stillness, is the place

and time in which intimacy with God is experienced. The Song of Songs is the Sabbath text; deep calling to deep.

Advent is the time in the Church's calendar when we prepare ourselves for God coming into our lives. Prayer is the lifeblood of faith and there is no better way to prepare ourselves to receive God into our hearts and lives or for our preparations to celebrate the coming of God in Christ than in opening ourselves like a hand, the five fingers of prayer, leading to stillness, calmness and silence. 'Prayer,' said John Donne, 'is our whole service to God.'

I do not pretend that prayer is easy. It takes a certain amount of commitment and dedication to bring oneself to a state of stillness. One has to postpone or banish other activities. Once at the place of physical and emotional and mental stillness, the first attempt at silence is assaulted by thoughts about tasks to be done, or mistakes we have made, or the many demons that may haunt the mind and soul, the thoughts or feelings that cripple or disfigure us. But don't give up: persevere. There is a deeper stillness to be found. The Scottish minister and academic, the late H R McIntosh, said:

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.

All that is nowhere more true than when we move from prayers to prayer, from words to silence. St Augustine put it this way: ‘We may pray most when we say least.’ Before inviting me to preach as Sole Nominee, the vacancy committee of Mayfield Salisbury heard me preach twice. On the second occasion I preached on prayer. I know they’ll remember it as though it were yesterday. Among other things, I quoted the English cleric, Austin Farrer, who said:

Are you brave enough to believe in God at all?...He can and does give entire attention, an adequate and an undivided attention to every single creature and every single circumstance....It is not silly, childish or superstitious to suppose that God attends to your prayer or your conduct like a parent watching an infant when the parent has nothing else to do. It is merely to credit God with being God.

Prayer, and in particular silent prayer, is the very pinnacle of Christian worship.

Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Pray always.’

Amen.