

Sermon

Sunday 3rd January, 2010

Lessons Jeremiah 31: 7 – 14

St John 1: 10 – 18

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

O God, who has given to us as the Ark of the Covenant, the Scriptures in which Your Holy Word is preserved; illumine our minds to receive Your revelation of old, made perfect in the Gospel; that we may be kept from offering the incense of our prayers at vain shrines; and may serve You only, our God and Father, and ever worship You in spirit and in truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory,
the glory as of the only begotten Son of the Father, full of grace and truth.**

St John 1: 14

The American talk show host, Oprah Winfrey, once interviewed the then First Lady, Hillary Clinton. Winfrey asked Mrs Clinton, ‘If you had the opportunity to recommend one book, just one book, to the American people, what would it be?’ Mrs Clinton chose the work of the Dutch priest, the late Henri Nouwen. The First Lady said that Nouwen’s insight and personal spirituality had helped her through her most painful and darkest times in the White House and in her life. Henri Nouwen was a distinguished scholar and teacher with over twenty books to his name. His spiritual writing is read by Christians and Christian leaders of all denominations. He is worthy of *our* attention. The last book he ever wrote, completed only two weeks before his own death, was entitled *Adam: God’s Beloved*. It is a record of Nouwen’s spiritual friendship with a

young man named Adam Arnett. Adam had severe learning difficulties and died at the age of 34. Of his friend Adam, Nouwen wrote:

Adam was my friend, my teacher, and my guide: an unusual friend, because he couldn't express affection and love in the way most people do; an unusual teacher, because he couldn't think reflectively or articulate ideas or concepts; an unusual guide, because he couldn't give me any concrete direction or advice.¹

In truth, we may catch ourselves thinking that Nouwen was being overly kind or loving or too sentimental about Adam and too generous in his comments about him. That thought within ourselves, that revelation, is part of what Nouwen has to say.

Adam lived as a member of the *l'Arche* community in Ontario. Nouwen left his teaching career for a sabbatical and he became one of Adam's many carers. They spent two hours each day together. Nouwen recalls one incident when a woman, a visitor, came to the *l'Arche* house. She met Adam and with his carers standing near, she said, 'Poor man, poor man, why did this happen to you? Let me pray over you...that the Lord may heal you.' She asked the carers to join her in prayer. One of the carers stepped forward and said, 'Adam doesn't need any healing; he is fine. He is just happy that you came for dinner. Please join us at the table.'²

¹ Henri Nouwen *Adam: God's Beloved* p2f

² *Ibid* p56

He recalls a similar exchange with one of his own friends. Nouwen's friend arrived at the house and met Nouwen with Adam. His friend, a minister, said, 'Henri, is this where you are spending your time? Did you leave the university, where you were such an inspiration to so many people, to give your time and energy to Adam? You aren't even trained for this!' Nouwen wrote:

I was shocked. My mind was racing, and I thought but did not say, 'Are you telling me that I am wasting my time with Adam? You, an experienced minister and a pastoral guide! Don't you see that Adam is my friend, my teacher, my spiritual director, my counsellor, my minister?'³

In his book, Nouwen goes on to say that Adam Arnett brought him closer to God than any book or professor. Nouwen said that like most of those for whom Adam was a 'client', the professional doctors, nurses, dentists and social workers, the minister did not see the Adam he knew.

Nouwen's life was changed. We dare not mock this for this priest felt that he had walked on holy ground and he had been led there by Adam. In her book, *An Infinity of Little Hours*, Nancy Maguire tells the story of a novice monk on the evening before he takes the vows that will commit him to a lifetime of prayer and silence and meditation. In his cell, the monk reads the Night Office, the evening prayers, and he concentrates on Psalm 24: 'Who can ascend the mountain of the Lord? And who can stand in his place?' The novice

³ ibid p40

wondered if he could stand in God's holy place?⁴ The priest, Henri Nouwen, believed that he walked on holy ground, experienced the presence of Jesus, and that he was led there by a man who could not talk or walk unaided, who had written no books, had never earned any money, could play no instrument, was neither an artist nor a religious or political thinker; but on holy ground Nouwen walked. We have much to learn here.

What did he learn? Let me use Nouwen's own words:

I must confess that there were moments when I was impatient and preoccupied by what I was going to do when I had finished Adam's 'routine.' Then, without being conscious of his person, started to rush him. Consciously, but most unconsciously, I hurriedly pushed his arms through his sleeves or his legs through his trousers. I wanted to be sure I was finished by 9am so that I could go to my other work. Right here I learned that Adam could communicate! He let me know that I wasn't being really present to him and was more concerned about my schedule than about his.⁵

There's the key phrase, 'I wasn't being really present to him.' Nouwen spoke to Adam about mundane things, such as the weather, the day ahead of both of them, the clothes he liked, the cereal that was on offer and then, over time, he confided in Adam his secrets, his moods, his frustrations, his easy and difficult relationships and his prayer life. Nouwen came to realise that Adam was really there for him. The priest said, 'He was really there for me, listening with his

⁴ Nancy Klein Maguire *An Infinity of Little Hours* p128

⁵ Henri Nouwen *Adam: God's Beloved* p34

whole being and offering me a safe space to be.’⁶ With great sensitivity, passion and honesty, Nouwen said:

[Adam] was becoming a friend and a trustworthy companion, explaining to me by his very presence what I should have known all along: that what I most desire in life – love, friendship, community, and a deep sense of belonging – I was finding with him. His very gentle being was communicating with me in our moments together, and he began to educate me about love in a profoundly deep way. I am convinced that somewhere deep down Adam ‘knew’ that he was loved. He knew it in his very soul. Adam was not able to reflect on love, on the heart as the centre of our being, the core of our humanity where we give and receive love. He could not talk with me about the movements of his heart or my heart or the heart of God. He could explain nothing to me in words. But his heart was there, totally alive, full of love which he could both give and receive. Adam’s heart made him fully alive.⁷

In God’s Kingdom, this is how the stature of humanity is measured. Later in his book, Nouwen reflects on his own ‘disabilities’: his own intense feelings of abandonment, rejection, neediness, dependence and despair. In his life, he was challenged to believe in God’s love for him when every last crutch of merit and respectability was taken away. Nouwen understood that he was no different, no different, from Adam. ‘Our poverties had touched each other and our relationship was sound,’⁸ he said.

⁶ ibid p36

⁷ ibid p37

⁸ ibid p68

Jesus was the Word made flesh, the only begotten Son of God, who came to lead us into the womb of the Father.⁹ I could give you a synopsis of the many theological and philosophical nuances hidden in the term ‘the Word’ from the Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, through Plato, Aristotle as well as the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament and the early Church Fathers but none of it will afford us an encounter with Jesus to quite the same extent as Adam Arnett. Nouwen said, “[Adam’s] great teaching to us was, ‘I can live only if you surround me with love and if you love one another. Otherwise, my life is useless and I am a burden.’¹⁰ Adam, he said, challenged us to make compassion, not competition, the way to fulfil our human vocation. Jesus tells us, ‘Insofar as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it for Me.’

Too often theologians and ministers over-rationalise the verse ‘The Word became flesh.’ Too readily we get caught up in matters of metaphysics. What did Jesus do? He stopped for the woman who touched the hem of his garment, he stopped for the tax collector who had climbed the tree, he knelt with the woman caught committing adultery, he took a blind man by the hand and walked with him, he listened to the story of a Samaritan woman by a well, he travelled to the bed of a dying child and he wept, he wept over the death of Lazarus, a man who never speaks. Part of the mystery of the Word becoming

⁹ Jean Vanier *Drawn into the Mystery of Jesus through the Gospel of John* p21

¹⁰ Henri Nouwen *Adam: God’s Beloved* p77

flesh is that the Divine logos, the fire of God, can burn in each of us. With faith, we are the Body of Christ, the flesh of Christ, living in the world today. Origen spoke of the Word that became flesh being broken up and thinned out amongst us. In faith, in prayer, in meditation, in the reading of Scripture and most supremely in acts of compassion (and not competition) the Word, the Divine logos, became and becomes flesh. Through compassion we are drawn into the womb of the Father. It is in being truly present to the humanity of others that we are touched and healed.

Can you think of a better way to live your life this year?

Amen.