

Sermon

Sunday 7th February, 2010

Lessons Isaiah 6: 1 – 8 1 Corinthians 15: 1 – 11 St Luke 5: 1 – 11

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Make us, O Lord, attentive to Your Word that we may learn truly to know You; and knowing You, to love You; and loving You, to become like You; our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Jesus said to Simon, ‘Launch out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch.’

St Luke 5: 4

One of the greatest Christian thinkers of the modern age is John Henry Newman. Newman was born in London in 1801, at the very beginning of the nineteenth century. He lived for ninety years; his life, writings and sermons, changed the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches in England. His life can broadly be split into two parts: the first forty-five years within the Church of England and the second forty-five years within the Church of Rome. Newman moved to the Roman Church because, he felt, it alone had apostolic authority and, as a scholar of the early Church Fathers, direct continuity with those who had gone before grew in importance to him. He needed to be part of that. Popularly, Newman is perhaps most famous for his poem *The Dream of Gerontius* which tells the spiritual story of a dying man. We may well recognise part of this poem in the hymn *Praise to the Holiest in the height* which, in the poem, are verses sung by choirs of angels. Seventy or so years after his death, the Roman Catholic Church convened the Second Ecumenical

Council or Vatican II. Vatican II opened in 1962 and ran for three years with between two and three thousand commissioners present at each session: it was the largest church council ever to meet. Orthodox and Protestant churches from all over the world sent representatives, including the Church of Scotland. It was opened by Pope John XXIII. The biographer, A N Wilson, describes Newman as ‘the *father* of the Second Vatican Council.’¹

The essence of Newman’s religion is intimacy with the Divine: Heart speaks to heart. He was an intellectual giant able to respond to the rising agnosticism or unbelief of the Victorian period. He said that religious questions, questions about the existence of God or God’s involvement in the material world, cannot be answered outwith religious devotion. To those outside faith, the answers offered by the Church will seem hollow. Here is a verse from another of his poetic hymns:

Lead, kindly Light, amid the encircling
gloom,
Lead thou me on;
The night is dark, and I am far from home,
Lead thou me on.
Keep thou my feet; I do not ask to see
The distant scene; one step enough for me.

¹ John Henry Newman Prayers, Poems and Meditations (Selected and Introduced by A N Wilson) 2007 xx

At the age of fifteen, Newman gave his life to God. Like the Psalmist, he always had a sense of a Presence beside him, and Newman's 'loyalty and devotion to this Presence was unflinching.'² As a child, he once wrote:

I thought life might be a dream or I an angel, and all the world a deception, my fellow-angels by a playful device concealing themselves from me, and deceiving me with a semblance of a material world.³

Was he mad? Remember the words of the Oxford don Keith Ward, 'Perhaps materialism is the greater delusion.' Newman felt, and I very much feel, that while we must keep our minds open to the intellectual challenges posed by science, we must at the same time nurture our enjoyment of God. Jesus said, 'Abide in my love.' Through our personal and public worship, we must spend time feeding our souls on Scripture and absorbing the wisdom of the saints. Let me read to you one of the prayers of Newman. It is slightly long but I do this for our own enrichment and to illustrate the extent to which he lived in and from God. It is intimate words to God and a reflection on God. Let's take it prayerfully:

I adore Thee, O...God, as the true and only Light! From Eternity to Eternity, before any creature was, when Thou wast alone, alone but not solitary, for Thou hast ever been Three in One, Thou wast the Infinite Light. There was none to see Thee but Thyself.....Most separate from all creatures in this Thy uncreated brightness. Most glorious, most beautiful.....Nothing created is more than the very shadow of Thee. Bright as are the Angels, they are poor and most unworthy shadows of Thee. They are pale and look dim and gather blackness before Thee.

² *ibid.*, xix

³ *ibid.*, ix

They are so feeble beside Thee, that they are unable to gaze upon Thee. The highest Seraphim veil their eyes, by deed as well as by word proclaiming Thy unutterable glory. For me, I cannot even look upon the sun, and what is this but a base material of Thee? How should I endure to look even on an Angel? and how could I look upon Thee and live? If I were placed in the illumination of Thy countenance, I should shrink up like the grass. O most gracious God, who shall approach Thee, being so glorious, yet how can I keep from Thee?⁴

Newman's religion was Heart speaking to heart. His depth of spirituality and his intimacy with the Holy One is there for all to see. It is with this frame of mind we turn to our lessons this morning: taken together, they are three quite magnificent pieces of Scripture. In the Book of Isaiah at chapter 6, the prophet describes a vision he has of God:

I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim [heavenly creatures]: each one had six wings, with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.

And one cried to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; The whole earth is full of His glory!'

Like the meditation of John Henry Newman, the words of Isaiah spring from a deep well of faith and spiritual sensitivity. The prophet sought to put into words the unutterable glory of God. In 2004, eleven leading German neuroscientists issued a document entitled, 'Manifesto on the Present and Future of Brain Research.' They were responding to the impression that brain research was 'on the threshold of wrestling its last secrets from the brain.'⁵ The scientists said that at present brain research has no empirically demonstrated

⁴ *ibid.*, 36

⁵ Hans Kung *The Beginning of All Things* 180

theory to offer about the connection between mind and brain'⁶ and the closing sentences of the manifesto read:

Even if at some point we have explained all the processes of the neuron which underlie human sympathy, being in love or moral responsibility, the distinctive feature of this 'internal perspective' nevertheless remains. For even a Bach fugue does not lose its fascination when one has understood precisely how it is constructed. Brain research will have to distinguish clearly what it can say and what lies outside its sphere of competence, just as musicology...has something to say about Bach's fugue, but can have no explanation of its unique beauty.

We live in a world of matter. Some would have us believe that the material world, that everything, every aspect of life, what we do, why we do it, what we feel, what we think, can be fully understood in terms of atoms, protons, electrons, genes, cells and neurons but that is a theory super-imposed on scientific data; it is a theory which goes beyond the competence of science. But in our consciousness, in the mind of our hearts, in our highest thought, we have an intuition, a secure sympathy, a way of thinking and knowing which stands above matter, and it is there that Spirit meets spirit. We know ourselves to be so much more than the bare biology of our bodies and in the mind of our hearts God pitches His tent.

On this ground, spiritual insight and imagination stands. From the thought of the heart, the prophet Isaiah wrote of his vision of the Holy One; from the thought of his heart, Newman wrote of the Presence that never left him. The

⁶ Ibid., 182

Holy One, the One who holds the stars on their courses, warrants the loftiest language. Many of those who met Jesus came to believe that in Him they heard the Voice or an Echo of the Eternal. St Paul certainly did and, like Cephas and the twelve and many hundreds of others, in his consciousness, the mind of his heart, in his highest thought, he saw the Christ, risen, alive, with death behind Him. St Paul wrote, 'He was seen by me...' John Donne said, 'When I believe God in Christ, dead, and risen again according to the Scriptures, I have nothing else to believe.'

Let me return again to the wisdom of Newman and close with the call of the disciples. All through our lives Christ is calling us. He calls us first in Baptism. If we fall from our Baptism, He calls us to repent. Newman tells us:

He call us on from grace to grace, and from holiness to holiness, while life is given us. Abraham was called from his home, Peter from his nets, Matthew from his office, Elisha from his farm, Nathanael from his retreat; we are all in course of calling, on and on, from one thing to another, having no resting-place, but mounting towards our eternal rest.....

Our Scriptures are not history but are to be thought of as glasses through which we see and understand the world. The calling of the disciples is not history: it is a faith narrative which helps us to see Christ walking among us now, by His hand, eye and voice, calling us to follow Him, a very real spiritual presence in our midst. In the darkness and quietness of prayer, in spiritually imaginative mediation, Christ does come to us, our thoughts being a room without doors

which He enters, never to overpower but there, present, offering us Bread and Wine and Love.

There is so much more to appreciate about life and reality than reductionist theory would have us believe. Amen.