

Sermon

Sunday 3rd May, 2009

Lessons

Acts 4: 5 – 12

1 John 3: 16 – 24

St John 10: 11 – 18

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

O LORD our God, who gives to Your suppliant people the Spirit of Truth, to lead them into all Truth; grant us clearly to understand, and heartily to embrace those things which are necessary for our salvation; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

A poem by Carol Ann Duffy:

He spoke early. Not the *goo goo goo* of infancy,
but *I am God*. Joseph kept away, carving himself
a silent Pinocchio out in the workshed. He said
he was a simply man and hadn't dreamed of this.

She grew anxious in that second year, would stare
at stars saying *Gabriel? Gabriel?* Your guess.
The village gossiped in the sun. The child was solitary,
his wide and solemn eyes could fill your head.

After he walked, our normal children crawled. Our wives
were first resentful, then superior. Mary's child
would bring her sorrow....better far to have a son
who gurgled nonsense at your breast. Googoo. Googoo.

But I am God. We heard him through the window,
heard the smacks which made us peep. What we saw
was commonplace enough. But afterwards, we wondered
why the infant did not cry. And why the Mother did.

But I am God: that is the memorable note which resounds at the end of this
poem. *But I am God*.

Edward Musgrave Blaiklock, born in 1903, died in 1983, was Chair of Classics
at Auckland University from the late 1940s to the early 1960s. He was a

champion of Christian apologetic literature in New Zealand. Blaiklock provides a moving introduction to the book, *The Practise of the Presence of God*, by Brother Lawrence. Brother Lawrence was a lay Carmelite monk who lived in the seventeenth century. John Wesley often recommended the work of Brother Lawrence. Writing at the beginning of the 1980s, not long before his death, Blaiklock, wrote:

Something over half a century ago, there was a second-hand bookshop in a side street in Auckland where I sometimes browsed among the dusty shelves. It was there that I first found Brother Lawrence in a tiny dark-green book of extracts with a few words of introduction.

In [that] small book I soon realised that I had a treasure. I had been a Christian for two years and knew all the stress and hard thinking which academic life imposes on an honest young man, seeking to integrate faith, life and learning. In my quest, John's Gospel already meant much to me, and here, in this little green book which slipped so snugly into my pocket, I met a cook from a Carmelite monastery kitchen who seemed without effort to turn the haunting last words of Christ into the simplicities of common living.

Blaiklock brings his introduction to the work of Brother Lawrence to a close by quoting the nineteenth century Swiss theologian, Frédéric Louis Godet, and Lawrence himself. Blaiklock concludes:

'Abide with me,' and Brother Lawrence did no more and no less. He ever stressed the vital power of faith, the key to all his practice and divine awareness. 'Abiding' is a practice of faith. Godet defines it as 'that continuous act whereby we lay aside all that which we might derive from our own strength to draw all from Christ by faith.' The practice of God's presence, the unbroken attitude of mind which envisages God within, the hearer of all speech, the monitor of all thoughts, the judge of all actions, is precisely, 'abiding in Christ.'

Now let us hear the words of Brother Lawrence. There is too much to cite here but I quote a little from what Lawrence calls *Practices Essential to Acquire the Spiritual Life*. Lawrence wrote:

1. The most holy practice, the nearest to daily life, and the most essential for the spiritual life, is the practice of the presence of God, that is to find joy in his divine company and to make it a habit of life, speaking humbly and conversing lovingly with him at all times, every moment, without rule or restriction, above all at times of temptation, distress, dryness, and revulsion, and even of faithlessness and sin.
2. We should apply ourselves continually, so that, without exception, all our actions become small occasions of fellowship with God, yet artlessly but just as it arises from the purity and the simplicity of the heart.
4. We must, during all our labour and in all else we do, even in our reading and writing, holy though both may be – I say more, even during our formal devotions, and spoken prayers – pause for some short moment, as often indeed as we can, to worship God in the depth of our heart, to savour him, though it be but in passing, and as it were by stealth. Since you are not unaware that God is present before you whatever you are doing, that he is at the depth and centre of your soul, why not then pause from time to time at least from that which occupies you outwardly, even from your spoken prayers, to worship him inwardly, to praise him, petition him, to offer him your heart and thank him? What can God have that gives him greater satisfaction than that a thousand thousand times a day all his creatures should pause to withdraw and worship him in the heart.

The practices of the presence of God brings into our consciousness the closeness and intimacy of God. We capture a very real sense that God is near.

The practices or exercise recommended by Brother Lawrence brings into our minds, into the minds of self-conscious intelligent finite life, the peaceful, gentle, joyful Spirit of the Infinite. We gain a very real sense that God is at our

side, walking with us: He is our companion. The Infant in the poem of Carol Ann Duffy does not say *Googoo*; He says *I am God*. Practicing the presence of God, pausing, sharing silences or speaking without rule, re-orientates our souls to God, daily in the spare moments and times waiting that we all have.

Spiritually, we are called and encouraged to be at home with Him, to have Him in our home, so much so that anyone listening at the window of our soul will hear Him.

Jesus said, 'I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd gives His life for the sheep.' The image or metaphor of shepherd is well-established in Scripture.

In Scripture, 'Shepherd' is used figuratively to represent the relation of rulers to their subjects and of God to His people. In Jeremiah, God says to the people, 'I will give you shepherds according to My heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding.' In rebuking Israel's leaders, God says, 'For the shepherds have become dull-hearted, And have not sought the LORD; therefore they shall not prosper, And all their flocks shall be scattered.' In the Psalms, at 23, 'The LORD is my Shepherd, I shall not want,' and at 80, 'Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel.' The duties of a shepherd in an unenclosed country like Palestine were very onerous. In the words of one commentator:

In early morning he led forth the flock from the fold, marching at its head to the spot where they were to be pastured. Here he watched them all day, taking care that none of sheep strayed, and if any for a time eluded his watch and wandered away from the rest,

seeking diligently till he found and brought it back. In those lands sheep require to be supplied regularly with water, and the shepherd for this purpose has to guide them either to some running stream or to wells dug in the wilderness and furnished with troughs. At night he brought the flock home to the fold, counting them as they passed under the rod at the door to assure himself that none were missing. Nor did his labours always end at sunset. Often he had to guard the fold through the dark hours from the attack of wild beast, or the wily attempts of the prowling thief.

What comes shining through this characterization of a shepherd is the closeness, care and attention to duty. To that, in Jesus, we would add compassion. By day and by night, hour by hour, Jesus says, 'I am the Good Shepherd.' There is immense strength and insight to be gained when we increase our awareness, daily and drip by drip, that Jesus is our *Good Shepherd* who walks beside us.

Not for a moment do I doubt the Shepherd at my side watching over me, caring for me and walking with me, listening to me and there to guide if I am prepared to reflect and listen, but I do not believe that He will save me from any physical, emotional or spiritual suffering and hardship that may come my way. The Cross is the inescapable image, metaphor and theological message of God.

With the troubles and abuses in Iraq very much in mind, last year writing in *The Guardian*, the vicar and broadcaster, Giles Fraser, said:

Somewhere in the Middle East, Jesus Christ is trapped to a bench, his head wrapped in clingfilm. He furiously sucks against the plastic. A hole is pierced, but only so that a filthy rag can be stuffed back into his mouth. He is turned upside down and water slowly poured into the rag. The torturer whispers religious abuse: 'If you are God, save yourself you [fucking] idiot.' Fighting to pull in oxygen

through the increasingly saturated rag, his lungs start to fill up with water. Someone punches him in the stomach.

In this world, the Infant God grows to adulthood and is crucified; the Shepherd God is with us always but is powerless. In this world, God surrenders power. For too long, for centuries, we have not understood that. The Church has not understood that. We are obsessed with supernatural miracles, magic and I truly passionately believe that life is not like that. We need to take our images, our metaphors, such as God as Shepherd and re-work them in light of the Cross. Our God is the Crucified God. We need to understand His power in light of that. Like Brother Lawrence, I am in no doubt that Christ is a strength to us: having an awareness of Him with us is like nothing this world can give!

In one of her sermons, the Revd Margaret Forrester says this:

God in Christ suffers and dies with us and for us.
God in Christ endured the outrage of human dying and death itself.
God in Christ embraces us with his deathless love and his
unending kindness.
God invites us to live with him and to love him and to take risks
with him.

I do not know what you have to face.

I do not know
what burdens you carry
what problems you live with
what suffering you have to shoulder
what temptations you may face
what decisions you must take
what joys you may be given
what tears you may shed

but I believe that whatever you may have to face, God in Christ walks that path and holds you by the hand.

Jesus says, 'I am the Good Shepherd. I give my life for the sheep.'

Amen.