

**Sermon**

Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> December, 2009

Lessons Malachi 3: 1 – 4

Psalm 27

St Luke 1: 68 – 79

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

O LORD our God, who enlightens the heart of all who seek; enlighten our hearts with the truth of Your Word, that we may ponder and love those things that are pleasing to You; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This is the Second Sunday of Advent, the Sunday on which the Church would reflect on the place and importance of the prophets, both in the Old Testament and the New. In particular, we would look for the ways in which the prophets directed our attention to Christ. This is also Bible Sunday, the Sunday which is set aside for us to honour the place and importance of the God's *written* Word. This morning I shall wander between these two themes: the role of the prophets pointing us to Christ and the celebration of Scripture.

The Bible is best read meditatively. Some of what is written is very much culture-bound; in other words, limited in meaning to the time and location from which it arose. For example, in the Book of Leviticus (25: 39ff), there are instructions concerning slaves. The Hebrew people are told that they cannot have a Hebrew slave but they can have slaves of people from other nations. In Leviticus, we read:

And as for your male and female slaves whom you have – from the nations that are around you, from them you may buy male and female slaves.

These instructions, and others besides, are time and culture bound. These verses do not readily convey God's Word to us today and yet still Scripture is the single most powerful conduit of God's Voice. Many thousands of people, if not millions, have heard the still, small voice of God in and through the breath-taking beauty of creation. Joseph Addison wrote of the stars, the entire cosmos and the Creator, the great Original:

The Spacious Firmament on high,  
With all the blue Ethereal Sky,  
And spangled Heav'ns, a Shining Frame,  
Their great Original proclaim;  
Th' unwearied Sun, from day to day,  
Doth his Creator's Power display,  
And publishes to every Land  
The Work of an Almighty Hand.

And the poem concludes:

In Reason's Ear they all rejoice,  
And utter forth a glorious Voice,  
For ever singing as they shine,  
'The Hand that made us is Divine.'

Without a doubt, the silent stars speak to the soul of the Eternal. Perhaps like me, you have gazed at the night sky, for as long as you could withstand the cold, and through the darkness and the miracle of creation have sensed the Presence of the Eternal Mind and in your heart you have felt the faintest whisper of God's Voice. The beauty of the night sky so quickly takes us to praise and prayer. Many thousands, if not millions, of people have heard the

voice of the Holy One speak, if not sing, through the work of His Almighty Hand. Writing in the third century, Clement of Alexandria wrote:

God has given the universe a musical arrangement. He has placed the dissonant elements under the discipline of harmony that the whole world may be a symphony in his ears.....He has orchestrated this pure concert of the universe.

However much all of that is true, there is a higher, stronger and deeper revelation of God to be discovered in and through the words and images of Holy Scripture. However much we open the eyes of our faith and let God's creation point us to Him, still there is an unequalled place in revelation, in God's Self-revelation, to be found on the pages of the Old and New Testaments. Of the Book of Books, Sir Walter Scott said, 'Within this ample volume lies The mystery of mysteries.' And the great poet and priest, George Herbert said:

Oh Book! infinite sweetness! let my heart  
Suck every letter, and a honey gain,  
Precious for any grief in any part;  
To clear the breast, to mollify all pain.

And he concludes,

Thou art joy's handsell: heaven lies flat in thee,  
Subject to every mounter's bended knee.

Whether literally or metaphorically, it is important to prayerfully approach Holy Scripture on bended knee. It is God's written Word to us and even before we open the cover we should pray that God will bless our reading and study: it is God's Word - we should have the expectation that God will speak to us through

it. Remember the insight of Keith Ward: ‘Perhaps the material is the greater delusion.’ I believe it is: in reading Scripture prayerfully, with an open heart, Spirit will speak to spirit. It is not always the case but too many people have heard the Voice of the Divine for it not to be so.

It is probably worth making the point, to avoid any misunderstanding, that for the vast majority of people that Divine Voice, that Word which people hear, they hear through their own thoughts, through the printed word of Scripture, from a psalm or Gospel story, and not from a disembodied sound from above. The words of Scripture, though first spoken thousands of years ago, become our words and God’s existential Word to us. In Psalm twenty-seven, ‘we are listening to the words of someone who has been and still is in the grip of a life-threatening situation and who finds that, in reaching out to God, light breaks into his darkness.’<sup>1</sup> The psalmist said:

The LORD is my light and my salvation: whom shall I fear?  
The LORD is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

One thing I have desired of the LORD, That will I seek: That I  
may dwell in the house of LORD All the days of my life,  
To behold the beauty of the LORD, And to inquire in His temple.

The words of the psalmist become our words and somehow we are drawn closer to the Mystery that sustains all things, that holds all things in being. ‘Suck

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Davidson *The Vitality of Worship* p95

every letter,' says George Herbert, 'to mollify all pain.' Of Psalm 27, the great preacher Charles Spurgeon wrote:

**The LORD is the strength of my life.** Our life derives all its strength from him who is the author of it; and if he deigns to make us strong we cannot be weakened by all the machinations of the adversary.

**Of whom shall we be afraid?** The bold question looks into the future as well as the present. 'If God be for us,' who can be against us?

There is a deep, deep stillness and peace to be experienced in and through the meditational reading of this treasure we can all hold in our hands. It is important to understand that the Bible is made up of historical fragments, liturgy and theology and it is important to understand the place and importance of myth and metaphor. But, equally, if not more importantly, it is necessary to approach to Bible as if walking onto holy ground: on bended knee, we will feel the Presence of the Holy and, in our thoughts and those of the biblical writers, we will hear God speak.

As you know, I am not a believer in God dramatically intervening in human history: bolts of lightning, as far as I am concerned, are out. I simply cannot theologically, philosophically or pastorally get round the idea that God will arbitrarily intervene to save or heal some but not others or, worse, deal with the trivial and let the holocaust and the brutality of Rwanda go seemingly unchecked. That does not mean, however, that there is no God, nor that He is

dumb and neither does it mean that He is unable to influence individuals and events. He stands at the door and knocks. I was struck by the faith, hope and insight of John Johansen-Berg in his poem entitled *A Time of Hope*. It is an Advent poem set in Rwanda:

It seemed as though the world stood still  
when neighbours turned on neighbours,  
burning houses, killing men and women,  
sadly, so terribly, targeting children,  
well might they think that hope had ended –  
yet He is coming.

What is left to celebrate  
when your parents have been killed before your eyes,  
when your children have been slaughtered  
by those you thought your friends,  
when your arms show the marks of the machete?  
Yet He is coming.

Who is there to worship  
when one church has been burned to the ground,  
when another church has become the tomb of former  
                  worshippers,  
where acts of treachery have filled the nave  
and violence has surrounded the altar  
and the cries of slain infants still hang in the air?

It seemed as though Rwanda could not celebrate again,  
as though the faith of the people had been for ever crushed,  
as though the priests and pastors could no longer preach,  
as though the hymns were silenced by the genocide  
and the hopes of the people had forever perished  
maelstrom of a world gone mad.

Yet He is coming  
and the Advent praise rises from a people  
who know in their hearts that His light shines  
and the darkness will never overcome it.

In his most recent book, John Shelby Spong quotes his friend, Milton LeRoy, who is dying from a terminal illness. As Spong wrote his book, his friend agreed to write to him his thoughts as he lived through his final days: “[Milton] said that this book should be just two words: ‘God is.’” Milton LeRoy’s point is that God is not and never has been the God of lightning bolts. God, the Eternal Intelligence, the Holy One, is.....and if we delve and delve deeply into that Divine and Holy Silence we will be changed and because of that God will have influenced, if not changed, the outcome of events and history itself.

Jesus is not to be thought of so much as a crude intervention in the history of creation but as the supreme human expression of the Self-Revealing Spirit that sustains all life. With the eyes and insight of faith, God reveals Himself through the heavens and all created life and God reveals Himself supremely through the life, death and Resurrection of Jesus. But, He stands at the door and knocks. There is no force: God is. The prophets believed in the Self-Revealing God and into every darkness God can bring light. God is: He will come to you and me if we are prepared to delve into that Divine Silence, if we are prepared to let that Divine Silence which already dwells within us reveal itself and flourish.

Life is deadly serious and there is so much to be gained if we take it seriously.

Amen.