

Sermon

Sunday 12th October, 2008

Lessons

Exodus 32: 1 – 14

St Matthew 22: 1 – 14

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Blessed Lord,
who caused all holy Scripture to be written for our learning:
grant us so to hear them,
read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them,
that we may embrace and ever hold fast
the blessed hope of everlasting life,
which You have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

And the LORD said unto Moses, I have seen this people, and, behold, it is a stiffnecked people: Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may wax hot against them, and that I may consume them: and I will make of thee a great nation.

Exodus 32: 9 – 10

Do you hear the fury in the voice of the LORD? Is there any anger like the anger of God? Horace wrote, *Ira furor brevis est*: anger is a short madness.

Can we imagine anything more terrifying than the madness of God, the uncontrollable rage of the Almighty? How heaven would shake and creation crumble! *Let me alone, said God, that my wrath may wax hot against them, that I may consume them.* What are we to make of the anger of God? Do we believe in a deity who can be so overtaken by temper that he would in rage consume and destroy his own children? Is it credible to believe that God could lose His temper over the making of a gold bull-calf? Do we believe that the God whose creation is over fourteen billion years old, whose universe is expanding away from us at a velocity we cannot comprehend and whose creatures physically function each and every day because of millions of

chemical reactions within them, could possibly lose His temper over the making of a gold bull-calf? *Let me alone, said God, that my wrath may wax hot against them, that I may consume them.* What on earth is this passage about?

The narrative in this Exodus passage is even more interesting. I would ask you to listen very carefully to the dialogue. At verse 7, God says to Moses, ‘Go, get thee down, for thy people, which thou broughtest out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves.’ God says to Moses, ‘Get down from *my* mountain, for *your* people, whom *you* brought out of Egypt, have corrupted themselves.’ It was the LORD, Yahweh, who called to Moses from the burning bush. *I have heard my people cry*, he said, *and I have come down to rescue them.* It was the LORD who sent the ten plagues, the blood in the Nile, the flies, the hail, the locusts and the death of the first-born. It was the LORD who brought water from the rock when the people had nothing to drink. But now, the LORD says to Moses, ‘Get down from *my* mountain, for *your* people, whom *you* brought out of Egypt, have corrupted themselves.’ Is the LORD washing his hands of responsibility? What on earth is this passage about? Is it becoming any clearer to you?

Finally, what is interesting is why the people are saved. The people of Israel, who made the molten calf, are not destroyed or consumed. It is not too long before the LORD leads them forward on their journey to the Promised Land.

The people are saved not through some merit of their own but because Moses persuaded the LORD to change His mind. Moses says, ‘Turn from thy fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against thy people.’ At verse 14, we read, *And the LORD repented of the evil which he thought to do unto his people.* I do not normally lead a Bible study from the pulpit but this is a curious passage is it not? In fourteen verses, we have the LORD, Yahweh, in a rage, in anger which shakes the foundations of heaven and earth. We have the LORD, Yahweh, washing His hands of responsibility for His people. He promises their annihilation. And, in just fourteen verses, we have that same Yahweh repenting of the evil he thought to do. In her book, *A History of God*, Karen Armstrong asks, ‘Has God a future?’ On a superficial reading of this passage, I would say, ‘No.’

If Christianity is going to survive, then it is going to have to work very hard at understanding its own Scriptures. Christianity must look afresh at the Bible, at the treasure it has in its care. The Church must stop preaching from and quoting the Bible as though it was history, a chronological diary of events. God does speak through the Bible. I believe that I have heard Him speak to me through the words and images of Scripture, in dreams, prayer and meditation but the Bible should be thought of more as theology, myth, faith narrative, poetry and poetic prose rather than chronological history. If Christianity is going to survive, then our theology is going to have to mature. When the Twin

Towers collapsed Mayor Guillianio said that it was a miracle that the tiny church, St Paul's, survived. St Paul's sits at the very edge of Ground Zero. It stood untouched by the collapse of the Towers. The Mayor said it was a miracle. If the Mayor was making a statement of faith, that the LORD placed His hand over the tiny church while the Twin Towers were engulfed in flames and finally collapsed, then I want nothing to do with that faith. I do not believe that God intervenes in human history in such a crude manner. I do not believe that He has ever done so. The Bible is a record of the theological thought of the Jewish people over the last three to four thousand years. Humanity has been on this planet for, what is in effect, just a very few seconds and our relationship with God and our understanding of Him have just begun. What are we to make of the story of God, Moses and the molten calf?

Judaism was the first monotheistic faith to emerge in human history. In other words, the first faith to believe that there can only be one God. But, Judaism was not always a monotheistic faith. The LORD, Yahweh, becomes enraged because the people of Israel are worshipping another god. It is not that the people believe that the image, the molten calf, is the god. There is no evidence for that belief in Judaism. Yahweh's wrath rises up because the people worship another god. In the Ten Commandments we hear:

Thou shalt have no other gods before me....I the LORD thy God [I Yahweh thy God] am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the

fathers upon thy children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me...

Yahweh will tolerate no rivals. At the time of the exodus, Israel lived in a polytheistic world. We know from Babylonian and Canaanite sources that the supreme god was called El. From time to time, usually at New Year, the gods would get together under the presidency of El and they would discuss issues of importance and decide what would happen on earth. Listen to Psalm 82:

Yahweh takes his stand in the Council of El
to deliver judgements among the gods.

‘No more mockery of justice
no more favouring of the wicked!
Let the weak and the orphan have justice,
be fair to the wretched and the destitute,
rescue the weak and needy,
save them from the clutches of the wicked!’

Ignorant and senseless, they carry on blindly,
undermining the very basis of human society.
I once said, ‘You too are gods,
sons of El Elyon, all of you’;
but all the same, you shall die like men;
as one man, gods, you shall fall.

Yahweh is saying that the other gods are failing to meet the social challenges of the day. He is no longer prepared to accept them as sons of El and, in due course, Yahweh comes to usurp the supreme god. That said, even as late as the prophet Jeremiah, six hundred years after Moses and the exodus, many Israelites were found to be worshipping a god named the queen of heaven. Centuries before the Roman Catholic Church bestowed that title on Mary, there

was an Old Testament god who carried it. What we are listening in on is a people who, over generations, is wrestling with faith. The name *Israel* means to wrestle with God. They, like us, were trying to marry their theology with their self-understanding and their place in the universe. If I am right, no one here comes to Mayfield Salisbury to be protected from the truth or to be patronised with stale sentimentalities. In this place, we worship the Ultimate Reality or Mystery we, in faith, know and feel to be and to be at the centre of life and we will not sacrifice honesty or our intelligence in order to do that.

The theological victory of Yahweh, I believe, is a divine revelation. One Rabbi said, ‘God does not come to man oppressively but commensurately with a man’s power of receiving him.’ Through time, we learn more and more about God. Our understanding grows and matures. The victory of Yahweh not only brought monotheism to the fore it also elevated, as never before, the importance of humanity, the community and our fellow human beings. With the destruction of the first Jewish Temple in the period of the exile, in 587BC, the rabbis argued that Yahweh had been freed and was now enabled to inhabit the world. The *Shekinah*, the Holy Spirit, was now understood as the presence of God dwelling within His people. Though the rabbis could look back and see with fresh eyes that God had always been with them, they understood this revelation in a new way. The *Shekinah* means that God dwells within us.

Karen Armstrong writes:

Offences against a fellow human being were a denial of God himself, who had made men and women in his image....Thus murder was the greatest of all crimes because it was a sacrilege: 'Scripture instructs us that whatsoever sheds human blood is regarded as if he had diminished the divine image.' Serving another human being was an act of imitation dei: it reproduced God's benevolence and compassion. Because all were created in God's image, all were equal: even the High Priest should be beaten if he injures his fellow man, because it is tantamount to denying the existence of God....Spreading scandal about somebody was tantamount to denying the existence of God. Jews were not to think of God as a Big Brother, watching their every move from above; instead they were to cultivate a sense of God within each human being so that our dealings with others became sacred encounters.

Armstrong concludes:

Over the centuries Yahweh had become an idea that could help people to cultivate a compassion and respect for their fellow human beings.

That idea, that Self-Revelation of the Mystery we call God, climaxes in the birth, life, death, Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus. Here, supremely, we have the Spirit of God, the *Shekinah*, dwelling perfectly within one human being, in a man whose life, teaching, compassion and love were the perfect embodiment of Yahweh. There are Christians who speak of the Bible as though it were the dictated Word of God, in much the same way as Muslims claim of the Koran. We lose nothing in giving way on such claims. The Bible as a record of theological thought, as a record of human reflection, remains our primary source through which God speaks to us. We have nothing to fear in being honest.

In a moment, I shall invite you to stand with me to recite The Apostles' Creed. I know that one or two of you are not comfortable with this. For myself, reciting the Creed is no different from singing hymns, praying prayers, listening to the reading or preaching of the Word or, indeed, meditating in silence. To my mind, reciting the Creed is no different because each of activities is an expression of faith articulated by fellow human beings in their honest wrestling with God. Each individual experiences God in a different way, in a way that is most appropriate to that individual, but we are a community in heaven and on earth and I want to be identified with and honour those who have gone before me while, at the same, do my own wrestling.

Let me close with a short poem because you have not had a poem today. You have had a psalm but not a poem! It is a verse from the pen of Arthur Hugh Clough. Writing in 1851, he recognises that all words are inadequate, a simplistic account, of the essence of God in Himself. Clough writes:

O thou, in that mysterious shrine
Enthroned, as we must say, divine!
I will not frame one thought of what
Thou mayest either be or not.
I will not prate of 'thus' and 'so'
And be profane with 'yes' and 'no'.
Enough that in our soul and heart
Thou, whatso'er thou may'st be, art.

Amen.