

Sermon

Sunday 13th September, 2009

Lessons

Proverbs 1: 20 – 33 James 3: 1 - 12

St Mark 8: 27 – 38

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Grant us, O Lord, to ponder well what we hear out of Your Word; and by Your mercy may some holy and saving thought be borne in upon us; that it may come as new life to our souls in this hour of Your grace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Now Jesus and His disciples went out to the towns of Caesarea Philippi; and on the road He asked His disciples, saying to them, ‘Who do men say that I am?’ So they answered, ‘John the Baptist; but some say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Peter answered and said to Him, ‘You are the Christ.’

St Mark 8: 27-29

Jesus asked His disciples, ‘Who do you say that I am?’ He said to them, ‘I hear what others think and say about me, but who do *you* say that I am?’ The Church has wrestled with that question for two thousand years. Peter’s answer, ‘You are the Christ,’ is helpful but only to a point. Peter’s answer takes us to another question: what do we mean when we speak of the Christ? The question asked by Jesus is not of interest only to historians because it is an existential question. It is for each of us in the 21st century. Jesus asks us: Who do *you* say that I am?

In the Book of Proverbs, we read of Wisdom. In the New Testament, we read of the Word of God, of God’s Spirit within the Word and the Word of God coming to us. In the Old Testament, that Word is rendered the Wisdom of God. The Wisdom and the Word of God are the same thing. Wisdom says,

‘Whoever listens to me will dwell safely, And will be secure, without fear of evil.’ In the Letter of James, we read of the tongue. The author wrote: ‘Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening?’ Whatever else the Church wants to say of Jesus, it can with one voice say that He is the Wisdom of God: whoever listens to Him will dwell safely.’ And, without qualification, the Church can say that from the mouth of Jesus there flowed only fresh water – he spoke no evil to others, no deadly poison or iniquity is attributed to Him. Jesus asks again, ‘Who do *you* say that I am?’

I am almost always struck by the passion and vigorous language of the Reformer, Martin Luther. In speaking of Jesus as the Word of God, Luther said:

This we must realise in death, in the depths, and in doubt. I have this Word that I shall live, no matter how terribly death crowds in upon me. Take hold of that, my dear friend, I have the Word, I hold it in my hands, it is being spoken to me now! And therefore I need not and I cannot go on saying, ‘I once heard something about such a Word, it seems to me there might be such a thing.’ No, I have the Word, I hear it now.

And he is able to say:

Death, death be hanged, the Lord has promised me that I shall live.
This I believe!

For Luther, Jesus is the Word of God, a very present reality, pressing in, it seems, on his consciousness. With a strident faith and a deep confidence, Luther says, ‘Death, death be hanged, the Lord has promised me that I shall

live!’ Behind these words, we sense a very personal, intimate and intense relationship with Jesus. For Luther, Jesus is the Word of God and there is no surer Word throughout the universe.

The Christian minister and hymn-writer, John Newton, most famous for his hymn *Amazing Grace*, came to faith in God because of Jesus. Newton served on *The Greyhound*, a ship involved in the slave trade. In March, 1748 the ship was caught in a terrible storm which lasted several days. There was a real possibility that the ship, already damaged, would sink. The captain of the vessel, Captain Swanwick, remembered, as if any could forget, the foul language and blasphemies which Newton regularly poured out. Swanwick, well-versed in the Old Testament, attributed the fate of his ship to the sins of Newton and suggested that one way to save the ship was, like Jonah, to throw Newton overboard. Newton later wrote, ‘I thought it very probable that all that had befallen us was on my account, that I was at last found out by the powerful hand of God and condemned in my own breast.’ Before the storm blew up, Newton had been reading the Christian classic, *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas á Kempis and the Bible. Why he was reading these we do not know. Perhaps they were the only two books on board the ship. On reading the *Imitation of Christ*, Newton will have come upon these words:

So all-sufficient, so delightful, so heavenly sweet is the Friendship and Company of Jesus....Consider then how miserable thou makest thyself

by placing thy confidence as thy joy in any other.

A favourite passage from the Bible was the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

Newton identified with the bad character of the wayward younger brother and marvelled at the goodness of the father in running out to forgive such a son.

Newton wrote, 'I saw that the Lord had interposed so far to save me and I hoped he would do more.' 'Outward circumstances,' he said, 'helped in this place to make me more serious and earnest in crying to him who alone could relieve me.' Newton was not perfect: he was tempted again and again by drink, women and a foul mouth, a poisonous tongue. But as time went on he, more and more, grew into the friendship and company of Jesus. Newton's famous hymn may, at times, feel too sentimental but for him its sense was raw and real:

Amazing Grace! (how sweet the sound)
That sav'd a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see.

It is in the Parable of the Prodigal Son we hear the father say, 'For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' In the Gospel of St John, a blind man healed by Jesus tells the Pharisees, 'I was blind but now I see.' Martin Luther knew Jesus as the Word of God, the most trustworthy Word in all creation and John Newton knew Jesus as the one who taught him about grace and forgiveness, love and respect for humanity. Jesus brought cleansing to Newton's soul. Jesus asks us: 'Who do you say that I am?'

In his book, *In the Eye of the Storm*, Gene Robinson, the Bishop of New Hampshire, the first openly gay man to be called to serve in that office, asks, ‘Are you saved?’ He writes:

Maybe you can pinpoint the moment it happened. Or maybe you just get irritated when a perfect stranger asks you that question. But the most important thing that any of us can learn to do – in the church or school or the office or mall – is to tell the story of our own salvation.

Robinson says, ‘Are you saved?’ is a fair question. It means, ‘What is the story of your salvation? What is your vision of God?’ Robinson says, ‘Think of the people that Jesus paid attention to, and make sure those people are part of your story.’ The bishop cites the words Jesus used at the beginning of his public ministry, the words of Isaiah:

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.

Robinson says:

These are the people Jesus cared about – the people on the margins. Jesus made a habit of releasing people from prison. Those who lived in the prison of leprosy, the terrifying disease of his time. Can you imagine what it was like to have Jesus walk up and touch you, knowing that he was making himself ritually unclean? Can you imagine what that did for the souls of the people he touched? Those who lived in the prison of gender, reviled just for being a woman. Can you imagine having Jesus treat you not like a piece of meat, not like somebody

to be bartered and married off, but like a human being? No wonder women followed him everywhere and supported his ministry personally and financially. No wonder they were the ones at the foot of the cross when everybody else ran like crazy. No wonder they were the first witnesses to the resurrection.

God as liberator is the God of history, the God of the Exodus, but it is also Robinson's personal story of salvation. Of his consecration as bishop, Robinson said this:

Just before my consecration I received a number of death threats. I wore a bulletproof vest at my consecration, and bomb-sniffing dogs made the rounds in the arena that served as our church. My daughters were there, and they were pretty worried about me. But I was able to say, 'There are a lot of things worse than dying, like not really living, for instance. That would be the real tragedy. If I should die today, you'll know that I was doing what I felt God was calling me to do, and that's the ultimate blessing.'

Gene Robinson loves the question, 'Are you saved?' It allows him to tell his personal story of salvation and of God in Jesus as Liberator of the oppressed, of those in one sort of prison or another, of those forced to live on the margins. This Jesus gave Gene Robinson the courage to face his own death and the possibility of a violent death at that. We have heard of Jesus as the One who, in God's name, promised life after death; we have heard of Jesus as the One who, in God's name, promised the forgiveness of sins and a cleansed conscience; and, we have heard of Jesus as the One, who in God's name, has brought and brings good news to the oppressed and liberty to the captives. But, Jesus asks us: 'Who do *you* say that I am?'

Finally, for Mother Teresa, Jesus was....absent. She craved a sense of His presence, she prayed, she pleaded. In her diary, she wrote:

In the darkness....Lord, my God, who am I that You should forsake me? The child of your love – and now become as the most hated one – the one You have thrown away as unwanted – unloved. I call, I cling, I want, - and there is no One to answer – no One on Whom I can cling – no, No One – Alone. The darkness is so dark – and I am alone – Unwanted, forsaken - The loneliness of the heart that wants love is unbearable.

If there be God, please forgive me.- Trust all will end in Heaven with Jesus.

The work is in no doubt – because I am convinced that it is His not mine – I don't feel – not even a single simple thought or temptation enters my heart to claim anything in the work.

Who is Jesus now? Present, fully present, in the work of charity and compassion but entirely absent to the heart and soul!

Jesus asks us, 'Who do you say that I am?'

Amen.