

**Sermon**

Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> June, 2006

Lessons      1 Samuel 15: 34 – 16: 13      2 Corinthians 5: 6 – 10, 14 – 17  
Mark 4: 26 – 34

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

O Holy Spirit, who searches all things; turn our minds to Your light while Your Word is before us; that we may receive for our health, the bright rays of Your truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**St Paul wrote, ‘We walk by faith, not by sight,’ and ‘[Jesus] died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.’**

*2 Corinthians 5: 7, 15*

‘Faith,’ wrote the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, ‘is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen.’ In all three of our lessons this morning we are thinking about what lies in the heart and in the soul. Samuel, the last of the great judges of Israel, goes to Bethlehem in search of a new king. After meeting with seven of Jesse’s sons, the LORD chose none of them. Samuel asks Jesse, ‘Are all your sons here?’ Jesse replied, ‘There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.’ When the young David appears before Samuel, the LORD says to Samuel, ‘Arise, anoint him: for this is the one.’ The last of Israel’s great judges had found for Israel her new king. When Samuel had faced each of David’s older brothers the LORD had said to him:

Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature,  
because I have rejected him; for the LORD does not see as  
mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD  
looks on the heart.

The faith which lies within us comes from our heart and soul. It is not based on empirical evidence acceptable to science or a court of law. Faith stands on its own ground; it springs from the heart and soul. It is its own evidence. It is something we

feel and something we believe intellectually, even if we do not fully understand. The LORD looked into the heart of David and saw in him the possibility of faith that would make David a leader of God's people: the LORD looks on the heart.

Jesus compared the Kingdom of God to a mustard seed. The seed, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds; yet when it grows up it becomes the greatest of all the shrubs, and puts forth branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.' The phrase 'the Kingdom of God' means the reign of God. It is when faith is planted in our heart and soul that the Kingdom of God will grow and extend to the ends of the earth. It is when God reigns in our heart that the Kingdom of God will be all in all. John Ellerton finishes his hymn, *The day thou gavest, Lord, is ended*, with the verse:

So be it, Lord! thy throne shall never,  
Like earth's proud empires, pass away;  
Thy Kingdom stands and grows for ever,  
Till all thy creatures own thy sway.

Our concern is not the evidence of the scientist or the lawyer, but the evidence of our own heart and soul. St Paul said that we are to walk by faith, not by sight. We are to live not for ourselves but 'to him who died for us, and rose again.' When someone becomes close to you they become part of your consciousness, part of who you are, so much so that there is never a point when they are not inside you. When a lifelong partner dies, it is as if part of oneself has died too. Like David, we have the potential for great faith. Faith begins in us quietly, often in secret and from the most fragile of starts until the day we can, with confidence, walk by faith in the name of the One who died and rose again, until the day when God in Christ becomes so much a part of our consciousness that we cannot live without Him. This morning we are thinking about what lies within the heart and within the soul.

I am often inspired by the stories of Christian saints whose personal life has been so evidently shaped by Christ. Alexander Duff, who died in 1878, is one of the great figures in the history of the Church of Scotland. From his brilliant academic career in St Andrews he became the Church of Scotland's first appointed missionary to India. His immense abilities as an educationalist, scholar and communicator (he was fluent in several languages) helped him establish the sub-continent's first modern education system. He was instrumental in founding the University of Calcutta, where he was offered the Chancellorship and he established the city's teaching hospital. Many tributes were published at the time of his death. The Prime Minister, Gladstone, wrote that Duff 'stood in the first rank of intelligence, energy, devotion and advancement in the inward and spiritual life.' One of Duff's former pupil's wrote of him:

In the death of Dr Duff, Scotland has lost one of the noblest sons, the Protestant Church of Great Britain one of its brightest ornaments, and India...and the civilised world one of its greatest orators, and a truly great and good man.

But it is perhaps at his death that his faith is seen most clearly. With not long to live, lying exhausted on his bed, he said, 'I am very low and cannot say much, but I am living daily, habitually in [God.]' That is the road that we are all on. The potential for great faith was in Alexander Duff, a boy from rural Perthshire. Faith grew in him like a mustard seed until he was able to walk, not by sight, but by faith. 'I am living daily, habitually in God.'

Duff's story is not an isolated example. In the final two weeks of his life, the Reformer, John Knox, lay in his bed. His wife and his secretary read to him from the

Bible and from some of Calvin's sermons. He would not let his wife cancel a small supper which had been arranged. He managed to join his guests for a time. He ordered a new cask of wine be opened and urged his guests to drink as much as they liked for, he said, he would not live long enough to finish it himself. At midday on 24<sup>th</sup> November, 1572, Knox asked his wife to read a favourite verse from First Corinthians:

The trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised, incorruptible,  
and we shall be changed....O death, where is thy sting, O grave,  
where is thy victory?

Faintly, Knox commended his soul to God. He died soon after. That is the road we are on. Is not that the climax of the pilgrimage of the human soul, to stare death in the face and say, 'Where is thy sting?' Or to say with Duff, 'I live daily, habitually in God.' Or to say with St Paul, 'I walk by faith, not by sight. I live and die for the One who died and rose again.'

And yet, there can be hardships along the way that make walking by faith nearly impossible. Kathryn Greene-McCreight writes of her experience of depression. She was and remains a Christian. Depression took hold of her following the birth of her second child. Kathryn said, "Christians who have not faced the ravages of mental illness should not be quick with advice to those who suffer. Platitudes such as, 'Pray harder,' 'Let Jesus in,' even 'Cast your anxiety on him, because he cares for you,' make the depressive person hurt more." Kathryn comments on the story of Noah and the flood. She says that it is only after the flood that the dove can return with the olive leaf in its beak. She says:

During a depression, as during Noah's flood, the good providence of God is hidden from view. All I can see is the storm, all I can smell is the dung of my own ark, and all I can perceive is the very wrath of

God. And worse than Noah, I have no companions in my ark, just stinky, contentious inner beasts. Darkness is my only companion.

From Isaiah, a verse that Kathryn returned to again and again was:

Truly, you are a God who hides himself,  
O God of Israel, the Saviour.

To Kathryn, at least, there seems to be dark places where God cannot be seen. She does not say that God does not exist nor that He does not care. He remains the Saviour as the verse says but she felt herself to be alone because God hides Himself.

It need not be mental illness. Darkness comes in many forms. Maybe there has been a time, may be it is now, when you could confidently say, 'Truly, you are a God who hides himself.' The great Puritan, Samuel Rutherford, from bitter personal experience once said, 'Grace grows best in winter.' Rutherford, a most remarkable Christian who preached with evangelical eloquence of the loveliness of Christ, wrote the poem, *The Absent Christ*. It begins:

Who can discern Christ's secret ways,  
For with love's chain He fettered me  
Then ran away and left my soul  
To mourn in sweet captivity?

And what of the story of the Jews in their final minutes in the gas chamber at Auschwitz reciting the old Jewish love poem:

Hear O Israel, the Eternal our God, the Eternal is One.  
O Lord by your grace you nourish the living, and by  
your great pity you resurrect the dead; and you uphold  
the weak, cure the sick, break the chains of slaves, and  
faithfully you keep your promises to those who sleep  
in the dust. Who is like unto you, O merciful Father,  
and who could be like unto you?

If not for Kathryn in her mental illness, if not for Samuel Rutherford, then surely for the Jews in the gas chambers, the words of Isaiah speak most meaningfully: ‘Truly, you are a God who hides himself.’

Our walk by faith is not always a pleasure or rapturous joy. Sometimes darkness is our only companion, or so it seems. But I take comfort from the words of St Paul that we heard today: ‘Behold, I make all things new.’ Heaven is life with God in which there are festivals; where the poor man is king, the consumptive healed, the blind look into mirrors and see love looking back at them and industry is for mending the bones bent and the minds fractured by life. Our faith will take us there.

Remember the words sought by John Knox at his death: *the dead shall be raised, incorruptible, and we shall be changed....O death, where is thy sting?* And remember the words of Alexander Duff at the time of his death: *I am living daily, habitually in God.* Christians walk by faith in the daytime and in the night.

Amen.