

Sermon

Sunday 4th February, 2007

Lessons Isaiah 6: 1 – 8 1 Corinthians 15: 1 – 11 Luke 5: 1 – 11

Prayer of Illumination

O God, who has given us the great and saving truths of Your gospel; grant us, we beseech You, to live amidst these things, to meditate upon them and to seek them; for those who go on seeking, find. Help us therefore, to learn those things on earth, the knowledge of which shall abide with us in heaven. Grant this for the sake of Jesus Christ. Amen.

And Simon answering said unto him, Master, we have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing: nevertheless at thy word I will let down the net. And when they had this done, they enclosed a great multitude of fishes....

Luke 5: 5 – 6

This morning our three passages of Scripture are about mission. God said to Isaiah, ‘Whom shall I send and who will go for us?’ The prophet replied, ‘Here I am; send me.’ In Corinthians, Paul tells the church at Corinth that the Risen Christ appeared to Peter and the twelve, then to five hundred brothers and sisters and then to the apostles. Paul describes himself as the least of the apostles. The word ‘apostle’ means sent out. The appearances of the Risen Christ serve to inflame the hearts of believers in order that they will go out and make new disciples. In the Gospel lesson, the story of the enormous catch of fish is a story about the mission of the Church. The Church is the net to catch men and women, to draw them to Jesus. All three passages are about mission, about making disciples. How do we make disciples in our time, in this post-Christian multi-cultural society, in this world in which the most prevailing religious voice is that of Islamic terrorism or conservative Christian morality? How do we make disciples today? How do we remain true to Jesus?

‘UK will pay. Islam is on its way.’ These are the words of the Muslim radical Abdul Saleem, who was convicted this week of stirring up racial hatred at a rally in London last year. Standing outside the Spanish and German embassies, Saleem said:

There will come a time when we will stand inside these embassies.
There will come a time when we will remove that flag.
There will come a time when we will raise the flag of Islam –
whether you like it or not, Islam is superior and cannot be surpassed.

Saleem and others like him believe that intimidation, conversion and out-breeding will one day bring the United Kingdom and the world under Sharia law. Saleem represents Islamism, not Islam. The President of Iran is surely exaggerating when he says that he wants to exterminate all Jews and wipe the State of Israel off the map. Surely? In a recent poll 51% of British Muslims believe a Muslim woman may not marry a non-Muslim, 43% that she cannot marry without the consent of her guardian and 46% say that a Muslim male may have four wives but a Muslim female only one husband. One commentator has asked, ‘Do we really want children to be taught that at school? And why is no one saying that it is child abuse to put a girl behind a veil?’ A recent Channel 4 *Dispatches* investigation into the radicalism of British mosques showed thousands of British Muslims listening, apparently contentedly, as they were exhorted by Islamist preachers to throw homosexuals off mountains and sign up their children to kill *kuffars* (non-Muslims). This is mission Islamist-style. None of us are helped in anyway when it is only the radical voice, the Islamist voice, from which we hear.

None of us are helped when the voice of Christianity in Britain is so prejudiced against homosexual people. The Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England have these past couple of weeks shown themselves to be unenlightened on the issue of

gay adoption. A home where love is, where children are celebrated, safe, nourished and cared for is what matters, not the sexual orientation of the parents. I know heterosexual couples who can learn a lot about love, family and respect from a homosexual couple, friends of mine, who have children. Later this year, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland will, for sure, fail to ratify legislation intended to protect ministers from facing discipline should they bless a same-sex partnership. That will be a sad day for the church and I for one, for a time at least, will be embarrassed when wearing my dog-collar, fearing that some people might identify me with that decision. It is good for us to hear how another Abrahamic faith regards homosexual people. Too many of us may be ready to say that the Islamist teaching is barbaric but our own is in every way reasonable. This is the twenty-first century post-Christian multi-cultural society in which we must do mission. How?

On Friday last, *The Scotsman* reported on a study which said that most Britons have never had it so good, but happiness eludes us. Stress and anxiety are everywhere. Dr Carol Craig of the Centre for Confidence and Well-being wrote that individualism and consumerism are not the answer: relationships and meaning are! These are the Church's bread and butter. Maybe if churches public message was, 'Individualism and Consumerism not working for you, then try spirituality at the church!' instead of the stereo-typical, 'Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve!', the church would begin to show itself getting into a better mindset for mission in the twenty-first century. In an instant, it would show itself to be concerned primarily with spirituality rather than morality. Professor Keith Ward says of world faiths, 'Religions need to take full account of the moral and scientific advances that have taken place in the world since

the sixteenth century.’ In some cases, one might say, that have taken place since the first century!

Spirituality rather than morality needs to be the Church’s primary message. Henri Nouwen says that:

As soon as I say, ‘God exists,’ I can no longer remain in the centre because the essence of that knowledge of God reveals my own existence as deriving its total being from His.

Nouwen says that conversion means realising that life is not so much about making choices about how we live as about the awareness that our existence is not the centre.

‘Outside God nothing is, nothing breathes, nothing moves, and nothing lives.’

Because God exists and God creates and sustains everything nothing is unimportant.

Nouwen said:

The converted person sees, hears, and understands with a divine eye, a divine ear, a divine heart. The converted person knows himself or herself and all the world in God. The converted person is where God is, and from that place everything matters: giving water, clothing the naked, working for a new world order, saying a prayer, smiling at a child, reading a book, and sleeping in peace. All has become different while all remains the same.

That spirituality is understood by many world faiths. It underpins the witness of the saints of every generation. Sharing and teaching spirituality is the beginning of mission in this century.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells Peter that from now on he will be catching men and women. ‘Catching’ does not imply force and, in the twenty-first century, proselytising is perceived as patronising; it implies a judgement, a put down, a downright insult. The story of the catching of the many fish is found in Luke and in the Gospel of John. It is probably a parable which has been reworked as a faith

narrative. It is based on the Old Testament prophecy of Ezekiel in which an abundant catch of fish shows that God in the last days, the days of His Messiah, is gathering all His children together. It is an image and a gospel of inclusion. All the fish, whatever their many differences, are God's children, and all are gathered together. Keith Ward has said:

Those who hold religion back are those who stick to their view that only their religion provides a set of absolutely certain, unquestionable, definitive and unchanging truths, while everybody else's religion is false. [That amounts to] a lack of humility, a lack of awareness of the limitations of one's own understanding, and the inability to see or seek the good in the religious beliefs of others.

In our time, then, we must work alongside our brothers and sisters of other faiths, with respect for them, where they value love and inclusion. Extremists must be exposed and overcome. Outdated morals must be shown for what they are. Each religion needs to mature, to accept, that its place is as one of the many paths that lead to God. I am a Christian, I believe in the Triune God, in Jesus as the Father's only Son, the Resurrection, the Ascension and Pentecost, but I do not believe that God loves or values me anymore than He does my Muslim friend in the corner shop. I do not believe that I am saved and my Muslim friend is not. Spirituality and inclusion are the marks of mission today: that is the gospel.

And, finally, compassion and co-operation. The flourishing of humanity is something every world faith understands. The exercise of compassion, done together, one faith alongside another, will not only undermine extremism but work to draw people of different faiths closer together, thus avoiding stereo-types and giving rise to unfounded fears. Nouwen wrote:

When I consider the immense waywardness of God's children, our lust, our greed, our violence, our anger, our resentment, and when I look at them through the eyes of God's heart, I cannot but weep and

cry out in grief: 'Look, my soul, at the way one human being tries to inflict as much pain on another as possible; look at these people plotting to bring harm to their fellows; look at these parents molesting their children; look at this landowner exploiting his workers; look at the violated women, the misused men, the abandoned children. Look, my soul, at the world; see the concentration camps, the prisons, the nursing homes, the hospitals, and hear the cries of the poor.

Is this not the language of love, compassion, the flourishing of humanity? Human beings the world over understand this language. Mission, then, in the twenty-first century means sharing and teaching spirituality; it means a gospel of inclusion with mature morality; and it means compassion for humanity and enthusiastic and energetic co-operation with our brothers and sisters of other world religions for the gain and flourishing of men, women and children, for the present and future generations.

Amen.