

Sermon

Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> April, 2006

Lessons      Jeremiah 31: 31 – 34      Hebrews 5: 5 – 10      John 12: 20 – 33

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

O Lord, who alone can give the hearing ear and the understanding heart; open our minds, we beseech You, to understand Your Word, which You have in Your mercy bestowed upon us. Save us from using Your Word deceitfully; from wresting it to serve our own purposes; from being in bondage to the letter while we neglect the spirit. But grant that we may search the Scriptures diligently, and find in them their testimony to Christ; and beholding His glory reflected in them, may be changed into the same image. In His name, we pray. Amen.

**The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.....This is the covenant that I will make: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.**

*Jeremiah 31: 31, 33*

What does it mean to have the new covenant written within us, written on our hearts?

The poet William Blake was said to be the dreamy member of his family. He said that ‘imagination perceives the Divine.’ As a child he was taught at home to read and love the Bible. Though he read many books in his lifetime, the Bible remained the most decisive reading for him because, he said, ‘the whole Bible was fill’d with imaginations and visions from end to end.’ At the age of four he said that he saw the face of God in an upstairs window. It was an experience, an imaginative vision that never left him. Latter in life, writing about creation, Blake said:

I do not behold the outward creation.....it is as dirt upon my feet, no part of me. ‘What,’ it will be questioned, ‘when the sun rises, do you not see a round disk of fire somewhat like a guinea?’ O no, no, I see an innumerable company of the heavenly host crying ‘Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty.’

Was Blake simply a dreamer or was he a man possessed of a divinely inspired imagination and a man receptive to visions of eternity? Drawing on years of reading

and re-reading the Bible and other books, words and images from Scripture suggested themselves quite naturally to him. Looking up at the sun, he saw the great company of heaven and was not limited in his sight to the four dimensions. Whatever else we may want to say about him, his life and thinking were saturated with an imaginative sense of the Divine Presence dwelling everywhere around him. In the Book of Genesis, when God makes a covenant with Noah He said:

When the rainbow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.

To Noah, the rainbow was more than a reflection and refraction of sunlight in drops of water. With a divinely inspired imagination, the rainbow reveals the Presence of God and His eternal love for His creation as clearly as it does the colours, red to violet. So when I ask what it means to have the new covenant written within us, written on our hearts, the first part of my answer is our need of the deliberate use of our God-given imagination in the establishment and growth of our faith. Blake said, 'Imagination perceives the Divine,' and he was right.

If the creative use of imagination is the first part of perceiving God's teaching written within us and on our hearts, then the second part is to know what is meant by the new covenant. At the Last Supper, Jesus said, 'This is my blood of the new covenant.' Jesus was speaking of God's Word in Jeremiah. For me, to have the new covenant written within us, written on our hearts, means to have the life and teaching of Jesus written within us, written on our hearts. Robert Browning wrote of his passion and longing for Jesus:

What is that I hunger for but God?  
My God, my God! Let me for once look on thee

As tho' nought else existed: we alone.

Oft have I stood by thee –  
Have I been keeping lonely watch with thee  
In the damp night by weeping Olivet,  
Or leaning on thy bosom, proudly less –  
Or dying with thee on the lonely cross –  
Or witnessing thy bursting from the tomb!

Browning has absorbed the life and teaching of Jesus so that he can say that he has stood by Jesus. With his heart and mind, he has been to Olivet, to Calvary and the empty tomb. Hugh MacIntosh, the Scottish churchman, spoke of the deep desire to have Christ in our consciousness while, at the same time, balance that with the necessity of being able to perform our daily tasks. MacIntosh said:

A great deal of the Christian life would be much easier if we thought a little more about Jesus Christ. As we fling ourselves into daily business, whatever it be, we cannot consciously be [thinking of] Christ all the time. If an engine driver is taking a train through a difficult junction at night and picking up the signals one by one, he cannot think of Christ all that time. If a surgeon is making the critical incision during an operation, his mind must not wander for a single instant, not even to the subject of Christ. God knows that better than we do; yes, but just because thus so constantly we have to turn away our thoughts and fix them upon absolutely essential duty. ....there is all the more reason that each day we should bring ourselves by conscious act into the presence of Christ in order to feed upon Him, to find in Him the meat and drink of our souls, and to receive from Him what will go to build up [our humanity] and character.

MacIntosh gently encourages us to think a little more about Jesus, albeit within the essential tasks of daily life. It is when we do that that we can perhaps begin to say with Browning, 'Let me for once look on thee as tho' nought else existed: we alone!'

Christ cannot be all in all to us if he is not also in our deeds. The life and teaching of Jesus cannot dwell within us, within our hearts, if our deeds do not reveal His presence also. If our faith does not have the power to inform the way in which we live, then of what good is it? Samuel Ward of the sixteenth century said:

Whether we eat or drink, whether we pray, read, or meditate, give alms or work in our callings, let all be done in the name of our Lord Jesus; begun with his leave, performed with his aid, and concluded to his glory, without whom we can do nothing, no more than the bird can fly without wings, the ship sail without wind or tide, the body move without the soul.

Let all be done in the name of our Lord Jesus. Lena Rustin, who died in 2004, was a speech therapist specialising in the treatment of stammering. Rather than concentrate on techniques to deal with hard consonants or running words into one another, Lena addressed the person, not just the symptom. The people she treated were children but she involved the whole family in her work. She taught the parents ‘to recognise the most single counterintuitive fact about dysfunctional behaviour.’ She asked them to visualise a precious object and then for that object to be stolen. The parents would describe their feelings of shock, grief, anger and distress. ‘Now you understand,’ she said, ‘what your child will feel like on losing her stammer.’ Change, even for the better, is painful.

Jonathan Sacks, who knew Lena Rustin, said that Lena taught families the importance of praise. ‘She told them that every day, they must catch each member of the family doing something right, and say so, specifically, positively and thankfully. She was creating, within each home, an atmosphere of mutual regard and continuous positive reinforcement. Lena wanted the parents to shape an environment for self-respect and self-confidence, not just for the stammering child but for every member of the family, so that the whole atmosphere of the home was one in which people felt safe to change and help others to do so.’ Not only for a stammering child but for life itself, with the life and teaching of Jesus written within us, written on our hearts, what we are about is creating within each sphere of influence an atmosphere of mutual regard and continuous positive reinforcement. With Jesus written on our hearts, what we are

about is creating and shaping an environment of self-respect and self-confidence, so that each person can discover who they are, their passions and live their life to its full potential.

A rabbi who was once imprisoned by the Russian government was asked a question by one of the prison wardens. The question had troubled the warden for some time. The warden said, "It says in the Bible that when Adam and Eve sinned, God asked them, 'Where are you?' But," said the warden, "God knows all, sees all, so why did he need to ask, 'Where are you?'" "Do you believe," asked the rabbi, "that the words of the Bible apply not only to that time but to all time?" "Of course," said the warden. "Then God's question," said the rabbi, "was not meant for Adam and Eve alone, but for all of us, including you and me. Of you, who work here, now, in this prison, God is asking, 'Where are you?' The warden smiled and said, 'Well answered.' But inwardly he trembled. God's question to us in life is, 'Where are you?'"

We are to use our divinely inspired imagination to see not only the sun but the heavenly host praising God in the skies. We are to feed on Christ daily, to find in Him the meat and drink for our souls. And we are to live showing that the life and teaching of Jesus is written on our hearts, creating spaces for people to grow and change and reach their full potential. The old emblem of St Christopher was of the saint wading through water lifting Christ above his head so that Christ may be seen by all. Our task is to do precisely that.

Amen.