

Sermon

Sunday 11th February, 2007

Lessons Jeremiah 17: 5 – 10 1 Corinthians 15: 12 – 20 Luke 6: 17 – 26

Prayer of Illumination

Make us, O Lord, attentive to Your Word that we may learn truly to know You; and knowing You, to love You; and loving You, to become like You, O Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

**St Paul said, ‘If Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain,
and your faith is also vain.’**

1 Corinthians 15: 12 – 20

Calvin said, ‘The main foundation of the whole Gospel is the death and resurrection of Christ.’ St Paul said that if Christ is not risen from the dead, then our preaching is in vain, our faith is in vain, our sins are not forgiven and the dead have perished. Our hope is in Christ, but if he is not raised from the dead, then we are of all people ‘most miserable.’ The Church’s faith and our faith stand or fall on the Resurrection. The Resurrection is the foundation of the whole Gospel. The prophet Jeremiah wrote:

Blessed is the man that trusteth in the LORD, and whose hope the LORD is.
For he shall be as a tree planted by the waters, and that spreadeth out her
roots by the river....her leaf shall be green...in the year of drought.

Our river is the Resurrection. It is our hope. That is where we place our trust in God. That is what we cling to. It is the core of the Church’s message: we have little else to offer the world.

Fleming Rutledge tells the story of attending a funeral in New York of a 58 year old man named Cook Kimball. He had been in poor health for some years and had been waiting for a kidney transplant. He died before he could receive the kidney. Two weeks before he died, he was on duty as an usher at church. He was ‘on the door.’

When he arrived at church he saw that a portion of St Paul's letter to the Corinthians was due to be read that morning. He took the list of people appointed to different tasks that day, crossed his name off the usher list and swapped it with the person who was down to read the Epistle lesson. Six days before his death he read the Resurrection lesson. The service had been taped and so when it came time for the reading at the funeral the mourners listened to Cook Kimball's voice, clear and strong, read these words:

If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain...If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied...But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

Rutledge said that 'Cook Kimball declared the Word of God that morning. The inexorability of Death has been reversed; its remorselessness has been overcome; its effects have been undone.' That is the main foundation of the Gospel: that is our faith. Cook Kimball looked his own death in the face and declared, 'Christ has been raised from the dead.' Was it hysteria or an unshakeable faith that made a young Covenanter on the scaffold in the Grassmarket just before the axe fell shout out, 'The angels! The angels! They've come to carry me to Jesus' bosom!' It may sound like hysteria to us but to those who watched the young man die, it was unshakeable faith: Christ has been raised from the dead!

In his book, *Looking in the Distance*, Richard Holloway makes great use of the Christian story, its themes, such as the Fall, Redemption and Grace. That said, Holloway goes on to describe religion, including Christianity, as the stories our ancestors told themselves for their own self-understanding. In the end, they are our

creation. There is no one in the universe but us. He quotes Annie Dillard who puts it like this:

There is no one but us. There is no one to send, nor a clean hand nor a pure heart on the face of the earth, nor in the earth, but only us, a generation comforting ourselves with the notion that we have come at an awkward time, that our innocent fathers are all dead – as if innocence had ever been – and our children busy and troubled, and we ourselves unfit, not yet ready, having each of us chosen wrongly, made a false start, failed, yielded to impulse and the tangled comfort of pleasures, and grown exhausted, unable to seek the thread, weak and involved. But there is no one but us, there never has been.

Holloway finishes his book by saying that as we get older and younger people take their place in the sun, the place we once had, we should bow out gracefully, giving thanks for our time. Sixty billion human beings have gone before us. When night comes, he says, we should bow out with grace. Too often old age is marked by bigotry and bitterness, not magnanimity and tolerance. We should bow out with grace. As always, Holloway has some interesting things to say. He can be profound and insightful. And, he is very good at taking us to the precipice, to the very edge, to life's end and to the darkness with only the abyss beyond. With Holloway, we can feel the precipice with our bare toes. He makes us look at the darkness of death and whispers in our ears that there is nothing there.

Ours is a faith that can face death. Our faith is not afraid of death. Can you imagine the scene in the first century when the congregation of the church in Corinth gathered on Sunday to hear Paul's letter being read out. This letter will have caused great excitement and eagerly, I am sure, the first Christians sat in anticipation of what the apostle had to say. What do they hear?

If Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain. If the dead rise not, then Christ is not raised. If Christ

be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.

There it is: the precipice, and faced two thousand years before Richard Holloway. St Paul said that if Christ is not risen from the dead, then the whole Gospel and our trust in God amounts to nothing. If Christ be not risen, then they dead have perished. The blessed and faithful departed have been obliterated, annihilated, blown out of existence. 'Cast,' said Tennyson, 'as rubbish to the void.' We are fools. The Church has never shied away from the possibility that we are alone in this quantum universe, that there is nothing beyond death and that we may, in fact, be fools.

The problem for Richard Holloway and many like him is the witness of St Paul. Paul wrote, 'But now, in fact, Christ is risen from the dead!' The apostle felt and saw Christ in his heart and soul and life. Such was the conviction of St Paul that he went to his death preaching that Christ is risen from the dead. Such was the strength of the fire blazing in his life. The problem for Richard Holloway and others is the witness of the saints and martyrs who have lived and died for Christ in every century.

Samuel Rutherford, whose letters I find a strength and inspiration, was imprisoned for his faith. He described Christ as his fellow-prisoner, but his years in prison were not easy for him. In his confinement and isolation, his faith was taken to its limit. To a Christian friend, he wrote:

It is true, my silent Sabbaths have been, and still are, as glassy ice whereon my faith can scarce hold its feet, and I am often blown on my back and off my feet with a storm of doubting. I cannot see through my cross to the far end.

Rutherford saw the abyss, he contemplated that Christ had not risen from the dead, he wondered if he was a fool and he faced death, the thought of his own death, and his

life obliterated. But the passion in his heart for Christ and sense of the Divine Being dwelling in his soul gave him strength. Rutherford trusted in his own experience of Christ in his life, as found in the Scriptures, worship, prayer and sharing with friends.

Rutherford wrote:

Yet I believe I am in Christ's books, and in his decree (not yet unfolded to me), a man triumphing, dancing and singing on the other side of the Red Sea, and laughing and praising the Lamb, over beyond time, sorrow, deprivation, losses, want of friends, and death.

Because of what he felt in his heart and soul, because of what he felt to be truer than the possibility that death was final, Rutherford swore that he was prepared to give up everything, even the most precious things in his life, if that is what God wanted of him. That strength of feeling and conviction found in the saints and martyrs and in our own hearts assures us that the Church has nothing to fear from those who would whisper to us in moments of doubt that we are alone. They are wrong.

The last words written by Emily Brontë before she died were these:

No coward soul is mine,
No trembler in the world's storm-troubled sphere:
I see Heaven's glories shine,
And faith shines equal, arming me from fear.

These words do not constitute a philosophical reflection: they were made on Brontë's deathbed. And what of the witness of Oliver Cromwell? As he lay dying with his weeping friends around him he said, 'Is there no one, is there no one here who will praise the Lord?' The inexorability of Death has been reversed; its remorselessness has been overcome; its effects have been undone. St Paul in his letter to the first Christians declared to them, 'I have seen Him, felt Him – and I know that He lives!' We should trust in what we know and not in the whispers of others. Girolamo

Savonarola, sometimes described as the reformer before Luther, said, 'They may kill me if they please; but they will never, never, never tear the living Christ from my heart!'

Christ is risen from the dead: our preaching is not in vain, our faith is not in vain.

Amen.