

Sermon

Sunday 29th October, 2006

Lessons Job 42: 1 – 6, 10 – 17 Hebrews 7: 23 – 28 Mark 10: 46 – 52

Prayer of Illumination

O God, who has made the eye to see, the ear to hear, and the heart to love; deliver us from inward blindness and hardness of heart; that seeing, we may perceive, and hearing may understand the truth of Your Word; and with our whole heart love and obey it; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

And when [Bartimæus] heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out, and say, Jesus, thou son of David, have mercy on me.

Mark 10: 47

The poet, David Gascoyne, died in 2001. He spent much of the 1930s in Paris. He published his third collection of poems in 1943. It has been said of Gascoyne's poetry that he takes us 'as near the precipice as a human being is able to go and still turn back.' In the 1960s, after a breakdown, he spent eleven years in psychiatric hospitals, in one of which he was cared for by his future wife Judy, marriage to whom restored his self-esteem. In his poem, *De Profundis*, he wrote of his despair. He wrote of the depths to which he had sunk and that he could no longer conceive of God, believe in God:

Out of these depths:

Where footsteps wander in the marsh of death and an
Intense infernal glare is on our faces facing down:

Out of these depths, what shamefaced cry
Half choked in the dry throat, as though a stone
Were our confounded tongue, can ever rise:
Because the mind has been struck blind
And may no more conceive
Thy throne.....

Because the depths
Are clear with only death's
Marsh-light, because the rock of grief
Is clearly too extreme for us to breach:
Deepen our depths.

And aid our unbelief.

Every now and then we can experience moments of illumination, of revelation, moments in which our faith is ecstatically lifted so that we, like many a saint and mystic before us, can claim for ourselves an experience of the Divine Presence in our mortal life. Can the words of the English visionary, Richard Jeffries, not become our words?

The bright morning sun of summer heated the eastern parapet of London Bridge....The fixed point of the day – the sun. I was intensely conscious of it; I felt it; I felt the presence of the immense powers of the universe; I felt out into the depths of the ether. So intensely conscious of the sun, the sky, the limitless space, I felt too in the midst of eternity then, in the midst of the supernatural, among the immortal and the greatness of the material, realised by the spirit. By these I saw my soul; by these I knew the supernatural to be more intensely real than the sun. I touched the supernatural, the immortal, there that moment.

Yet, typically, these are fleeting moments, though their effect upon our life and faith can last for years, maybe a lifetime. Every now and then we can experience moments of darkness, doubts about the reality of life, doubts which make us wonder if our faith and understanding of the universe is a delusion. Is God really there? Are we misreading what we think in our mind and feel in our heart? The existentialists, like Sartre, say that there is only the present moment. ‘Man,’ said Sartre, ‘is nothing else than what he makes of himself.’ We realise our potential in the present moment and there is nothingness outside that. No God, no life after death, no past, no future, only the present moment. Human life is lived surrounded by nothingness. Atheist existentialism is a thought, a doubt that many, if not all of us, will experience in our life at some point.

In the Church of Scotland's book of liturgy, *Common Order*, the baptismal service includes these words:

By water and the Holy Spirit,
God claims us as his own,
washes us from sin,
and sets us free from the power of death.
Here (in baptism) we know
that we are made one with Christ....

The sin in question is original sin. It has fallen out of favour in modern times. It is a term often misunderstood. It conjures up images of inherited guilt or is somehow related to the process of conception. In fact, the doctrine of original sin is a sound doctrine. It states that all human beings, though capable of union with God, are born out of communion with Him. It might be better to call it 'original alienation.' In the twentieth century the atheist existentialists thought they had come up with something new, that there was only the present moment and nothingness besides, but the Bible was thousands of years ahead of them. Original alienation, original sin, is that sense that we stand in time, in history, unrelated in our existence. Scripture says that we are born out of relationship with God. Our sense of alienation comes from that.

It is true that while we have moments of doubt and despair, of deep darkness, 'we find it hard to accept that our highest values and experiences of love or beauty are simply reducible to chemical configurations in the brain.' Humanity continues to have an instinct to believe in God. The Christian faith is quite different from many religions of the world. Fleming Rutledge says that Christianity is not a religion at all.

Religions are humanity's attempt to reach God, whereas Christianity is revelation. It is God's reaching out to humanity. The existentialists are right: we are born in unrelatedness. Our sense of alienation comes from a life self-enclosed, a life out of

union and communion with God. We live in darkness. And Sartre was right about one more thing. He said, 'In the end, it is we who have to decide and take responsibility for our decisions.'

Bartimaeus was a blind beggar who sat at the roadside. When he heard that Jesus of Nazareth was passing by, he shouted out, 'Jesus, *thou* son of David, have mercy on me.' When people around him told him to be quiet, to hold his peace, he cried all the more, '*Thou* son of David, have mercy on me.' Jesus hears Bartimaeus and tells him to come forward. Jesus asked him, 'What wilt thou that I should do unto thee?' The blind man replied, 'Lord, that I might receive my sight.' Jesus said, 'Go thy way; thy faith hath made thee whole.' It is quite something that in its prayers and in its Communion services the Church the world over uses the words, *Kyrie eleison; Christe eleison; Kyrie eleison* (Lord, have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord, have mercy.) Bartimaeus represents us all. 'Begging, on the edge of life, this blind beggar is a picture of the human race in our alienation from God.' We live in darkness; we live at times with an all-pervading sense that there is nothing out there. In life and in death, perhaps the most we can say is, 'Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy; Lord, have mercy.' Perhaps the most that we can do is reach out, like Bartimaeus, and say, *Kyrie eleison*.

There is no doubt that part of the meaning of this story is the inclusion of the poor in God's Kingdom. It is a story about God's compassion for the socially and economically excluded. But that is not the only meaning. This story is about spiritual blindness. It makes clear that into our darkness and in answer to our words, *Lord, have mercy*, Jesus enters and says, 'What wilt thou that I should do unto thee?'

There is a vision for us this morning to hold on to! Into our darkness, our fear of nothingness, our original alienation, original sin, God enters and asks, ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ Like Bartimaeus, our prayer should be, ‘Take away our blindness. Help us to see You in our life, in the daytime and in the night.’ John Henry Newman wrote:

O loving wisdom of our God,
When all was sin and shame,
A second Adam to the fight
And to the rescue came.

And from the Irish eight century hymn, we sing:

Be thou my vision,
O Lord of my heart,
naught be all else to me
save that thou art;
thou my best thought
in the day and the night,
waking or sleeping,
thy presence my light.

The Book of Hebrews says of Jesus that He is ‘holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens.’ It is this Jesus who stood before Bartimaeus in his darkness. While in his darkness, Jesus came to him and spoke to him. Jesus made him whole, saved, healed him. That is the vision to take out with you this morning – not that our sense, at times of alienation, of doubt, despair and darkness are not real and frightening and overwhelming, but that God in Jesus enters our life precisely in our darkness. Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy; Lord, have mercy.

Having opened with a poem, let me close with another. R S Thomas wrote this poem entitled, ‘The Kingdom.’ It speaks literally and metaphorically of the poor and the blind:

It's a long way off, but inside it
There are quite different things going on:
Festivals at which the poor man
Is king and the consumptive is
Healed: mirrors in which the blind look
At themselves and love looks at them
Back; and industry is for mending
The bent bones and the minds fractured
By life. It's along way off, but to get
There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you will purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf.

Amen.