

Sermon

Sunday 4th March, 2007

Lessons

Genesis 15: 1 – 12, 17 -18
Luke 13: 31 – 35

Philippians 3: 17 – 4: 1

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

O God, whose Word is sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing both heart and conscience with many wounds; let the sword of Your Spirit pierce us through; and grant that the wounds that are made by Your truth, may be healed by Your love; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Imagine, if you will, the stage of the Usher Hall with six dancers upon it, three of whom have learning difficulties. The six dance in pairs weaving around each other until finally they join hands making one circle. They dance to a song: *Thanks for the circle*. That was the scene in the Usher Hall last Thursday evening. Martin Luther said, 'I would not give up one moment of heaven for all the joys and riches of the world, even if it lasted for thousands and thousands of years.' Was that scene a taste of heaven on earth, here in our own city?

Last Thursday, the audience was treated to dozens of photographs displayed on a large screen, all of which portrayed people involved in the work of the *L'Arche* community established by Jean Vanier. The photograph which struck me the most was of a man with Down's Syndrome who played Jesus in an Easter play. The man was photographed holding onto the cross in a scene of crucifixion. This Jesus made a healthy change from Jesus often being played by stereo-typical handsome young men, often with an athletic physique. The man in the *L'Arche* photograph was altogether more human, more obviously vulnerable and more broken. As we approach Good Friday, we may well want to keep this image of crucifixion in mind. Christ was broken on the cross for and because of our broken humanity. 'I would not give up

one moment of heaven for all the joys and riches of the world,' said Luther. Luther knew heaven to be a life lived in eternity with God in which the broken are made whole. Vanier said to his thousand strong audience, 'We [each] think we're the best, but we are all broken.'

This is a message of a different order from the one we are used to. We live in a hostile world where conflict thrives, where our heroes and heroines are people who are classically attractive, financially successful, hold positions of power and who are perceived to be strong individuals without weakness. At one level, there are such attractive, successful, powerful individuals in the world, but at a deeper level, at our most fundamental level, Vanier is right: 'We think we're the best, but we are all broken.' Luther knew heaven to be a life lived in eternity with God in which the broken are made whole and, he said, 'I would not give that up for anything!' Vanier told the story of one man who works with prostitutes in Paris. The man says, 'Once you have listened to their story, you cannot think of them in the same way. You cannot be the same.' Some years ago, Vanier met ten prisoners and had the opportunity to listen to their stories, their account of their lives. Having listened to what each of them had experienced, he said, 'I realised it could have been me. I have felt anger rising inside me. I have felt the urge to be violent. If the things that happened to those men had happened to me, I could be sitting where they are. It could have been me.'

Vanier spoke of a family in America. They had two children. The youngest, one year old, had profound difficulties and would scream almost all the time, through all waking hours. The mother said that life was hard, very hard for all the family. The

father said, 'I want to throw my son out of the window.' The potential for violence is within us all, even towards those we love most. Good Friday is about our brokenness and violence and Easter is about our healing, forgiveness and our transformation. *I would not give up one moment of heaven for all the joys and riches of the world!*

Isaac Watts described heaven as the 'land of pure delight':

Then shall I see and hear and know
all I desired or wished below;
and every power find sweet employ
in that eternal world of joy.

I find the thought of heaven to be a source of transforming power in this life. Isaac Watts, half an hour before he died, was visited by George Whitefield. Whitefield asked him how he was. Watts replied, 'I am one of Christ's waiting servants.' So saturated with Christ was his life and soul that Watts, in his final moments before death, was at peace. In his old age John Newton was urged to give up preaching because of his failing eye sight. He found it difficult to read his manuscript and so took a servant with him into the pulpit. The servant stood behind him and with a pointer traced out the lines. One Sunday morning came the words, 'Jesus Christ is precious!' He repeated them for the sake of emphasis. His servant, thinking Newton to be confused, whispered, 'Go on, go on, you said that before.' Newton turned to the man and said, 'I said that twice, and I am going to say it again.' With renewed vigour, Newton preached, 'Jesus Christ is precious!'

Paul wrote to the Christians at Philippi, 'Our conversation is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.' And, 'Stand fast in the LORD.' That is something to hold on to in our brokenness, though it will not change the events that must come our way. Look to heaven; look for the Saviour. Stand fast in

the LORD. It is that same LORD and same transforming power we see in the life of Abraham. God tells Abraham, 'I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward.' And to the childless father of the faith, God says, 'Count the stars, if you are able to count them. So many shall your descendents be.' Then we are told, 'Abraham believed in the LORD.' Unbelievable the miracle promised, yet Abraham believed in the LORD. Paul wrote, 'Stand fast in the LORD. Look to heaven for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus.' Believe it: God turns Good Friday into Easter; broken people are healed, forgiven and transformed. John Newton said, 'Jesus Christ is precious!' Last Thursday, Jean Vanier said, 'The whole of the revelation of Jesus is that we are all precious!' The prostitute, the prisoner, the man, woman and child with learning difficulties and each person who is broken, which means every person, is precious. In living out the Kingdom in this life, we are invited by Jesus to create a society in which all people are treated as precious but there is more to the gospel than this. We are to look to heaven for our strength, our Shield and Protector; our Healer, Priest and Saviour. Stand fast in the LORD!

Before coming to the Usher Hall, Vanier visited Her Majesty's Prison Edinburgh at Saughton. He said to the prisoners that he knew that they had done things that were wrong, some terrible things but, said Vanier, my message to them was, 'You are OK. You are more beautiful than you dare believe.' There is no doubt that these men have done things that are bad, violent and wrong. There is no doubt that many of them should be in prison, but speaking as if to their soul, Vanier said, 'You are OK. You are precious!' In the Gospel lesson we hear that Jerusalem rejects Jesus. It is the archetypal example of the religious man and woman who believe themselves to be right with God and those not in their circle to be different and wrong and to be, at a

deep level, rejected. Jerusalem does not want to hear the message of Jesus that all of God's children are precious. Jerusalem does not want to hear that all God's children in this world are broken, including the most righteous. Do we like the thought of Vanier telling the prisoners of Saughton, 'You are precious!?' Do we like the thought of a Christian telling a Muslim, Hindu, Sikh and Taoist, 'You are precious!?'

Heaven is a place, which is not a place in time or space, in which all God's children dance together and where all give thanks for the circle. Abraham believed in the Promised Land, a land where his descendants, the people of Israel, God's children would live with justice and in peace with God. He travelled with that faith in his heart. We are invited to believe in the Promised Land, in heaven, where all God's children, of every nationality, creed and colour, will live with justice and peace with God. We are invited to travel through this world on our journey with that faith in our heart. Stand fast in the LORD!

Amen.