

Sermon

Sunday 6th May, 2007

Lessons

Acts 11: 1 – 18

Revelation 21: 1 – 6

St John 13: 31 – 35

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Come upon us now, O Holy Spirit,
and give us holy thoughts which are translated into prayer,
holy prayers which are translated into love,
and holy love which is translated into life;
for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Jesus said to his disciples, ‘Love one another.’

Mark Johnson was high on glue and *Strongbow* at the age of eight. By the age of eleven he had taken heroin, witnessed friends rape a young girl with special needs and by the age of twenty was in prison for violent robbery. He spent the next ten years devoted to heroin. During this period he had two children with his girlfriend, who was a prostitute. In 1999, he spent a year sleeping rough on the streets of London, ‘ate out of bins, was infested with lice, and his socks became one with the scabs on his feet.’

In his book, *Wasted*, Mark Johnson describes the moment when he realised that he had reached rock bottom and wanted to change:

I remember all the other rock bottoms. The rock bottom of being in jail without having a clear memory of my crime. The rock bottom of sending my prostitute girlfriend out to find men so I could get more crack. The rock bottom of blowing my mind with drugs and breaking down. The rock bottom of having a son and not being able to look after him, of banging up in the back seat of the car and throwing sweets to the front seat to keep him quiet. The rock bottom of hanging around some of the worst housing estates to score. But none of those was really rock bottom. They were just ledges in the ocean as I sank lower and lower. Now I’ve reached the bottom. I’m on the streets and I’m thin and lonely and the drugs have stopped working. I’d like to change.

And change he did. Mark has won the *Daily Mirror* Pride of Britain Award, he is on the Board of the National Probation Service in England and he works for the Prince's Trust. Prince Charles describes Mark as 'a personal friend.'

Many factors led Mark down the road he took. His own analysis is that the single most important factor was a lack of love and care from his family. His father was a big, popular character in the steel works at Newcastle but at home he was violent towards his wife and children. He was cruel, unsympathetic and unloving to his children. Mark's mother was a Jehovah's Witness. She managed to fill Mark with an overwhelming sense of guilt and she would say to her four children, 'If you don't love my God, I can't love you.' Mark writes:

If you don't experience love you go looking for it, and heroin will be your mum, dad, brother, sister, your lover, everything.

Mark's mother's twisted theology caused a pain in his heart and soul from which he cannot free himself. He lives with an open wound that refuses to heal. 'If you don't love my God, I can't love you.' It is sometimes hard to believe that a lack of love can help lead to alcohol abuse, glue sniffing, rape, violent crime and heroin addiction but there it is – in Mark and thousands like him in our prisons. His own mother said to him, 'If you don't love my God, I can't love you.'

There are two things wrong, theologically, with what she said. For me, the first is her use of the term 'my God': if you don't love *my* God. If you don't love my understanding of God, my mental conception of God, then I can't love you. To anyone who has an understanding of God, which is probably everyone, the words of the fourth century saint and theologian, Gregory of Nyssa, are worth pondering:

The simplicity of the True Faith assumes God to be that which He is, namely, incapable of being grasped by any term, or any idea, or any other device of our apprehension, remaining beyond the reach not only of the human but of the angelic and all supramundane intelligence, unthinkable, unutterable, above all expression in words, having but one name that can represent His proper nature, the single name being 'Above Every Name.'

We may, with the psalmist, wish to speak of God as a shepherd, as *my* Shepherd, as the One who will guide us even through the valley of the shadow of death, but Gregory of Nyssa is correct: God is the name Above Every Name and every term, idea and expression is inadequate. 'My God' is always going to be a dim reflection and an appallingly limited understanding of the true nature of the Divine Being. To make our understanding of God a condition for other people coming to faith, for experiencing God for themselves, is culpable, a travesty and, surely, offensive to God Himself. Mark's mother's theology is a reminder to us that when we find an expression of theology with which we are comfortable and which works for us we need to beware the temptation to make our narrow and dim view of God an absolute. The twentieth century theologian, Paul Tillich, said of faith that there is not absolute truth in the thinking of humanity, other than the truth that no one possesses it. God cannot be possessed. In this sense at least we ought not to speak of '*my God*.'

Mark's mother also said, 'I can't love you.' If you don't love my God, I can't love you. Do *we* ever make our theology, *our* religion, a condition of our love for others? On the night before he died, Jesus said to his disciples, 'I give you a new commandment: love one another.' On first hearing, Jesus' teaching sounds like wise words from other world faiths. From ancient Hindu writing, we read, 'One should never do to another that which one would regard as injurious to oneself. This, in brief, is the Rule of Righteousness.' Confucius said, 'Do not do to others what you

would not like yourself.’ Zoroastrian scriptures declare, ‘That nature only is good when it shall not do unto another whatever is not good for its own self.’ From the Old Testament, from the Holiness Code, we read, ‘Love your neighbour as you love yourself.’ From the Jewish Talmud, ‘What is hateful to yourself do not do to your fellow man. That is the whole of the Torah.’ But on the night before he died, he summed up his life and teaching with a new commandment, ‘Love one another.’ The teaching of Jesus is a step beyond what the others said and wrote.

Jesus leaves his disciples ‘his last instruction, his spiritual will and testament, the heart and soul of his whole message. In the Law of Moses, the Hebrews were called to love God with all their soul, heart, mind and strength and to love their neighbours as themselves. Here Jesus is calling his disciples not only to love others as they love themselves but to love as he – Jesus – loves them.’ The theologian John Hick says that Jesus’ conception of love of neighbour goes beyond all that has gone before.

Hick writes:

[Jesus] taught a complete trust in God in which one forgets one’s private interests and so becomes free to serve others in their needs. He called his hearers to give and forgive without limit; to treat all people, including the despised Samaritans and the overbearing Romans, as their neighbours; and to live without anxiety about tomorrow, trusting in God’s providential care. They would thus be true children of their heavenly Father and heirs of the kingdom: ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust.’

The teaching of Jesus is one step beyond what others have said. The love of Jesus involves a commitment to others and a compassion for others that has no room for self-interest. It is truly unconditional. Like no other, we see in Jesus God ‘penetrating the ultimate depths of human suffering.’ We see God’s ‘capacity for

compassion.’ Calvin said, ‘The goodness of God extends to and is shed upon the whole world, so we ought to love all, even those who hate us. And Christ holds out His own example – not because we can attain it, for He is infinitely in advance of us, but that we may at any rate aim at the same mark.’

Jesus is worthy of our worship precisely because His message is one of love for all peoples. It is not partisan, nor is it conditional. We cannot say, ‘If you don’t love my God, I can’t love you.’ We cannot say that to anyone: not to any Christian with a different understanding of God from our own, not to a Hindu or Muslim and not to an atheist. When the apostle Peter reported to the Christians in Jerusalem about his recent trip they were furious that he had been a guest in the home of a Gentile.

Calvin said the Christians ‘quarrelled pertinaciously’ with Peter. They were stubborn, persistent, obstinate and self-assured. For the Christians in Jerusalem, how could uncircumcised Gentiles be followers of Jesus? They believed that one had to be a Jew to be a follower. Peter told them of a vision in which Jew and Gentile could eat together, a vision, he believed, from God. The uncircumcised Gentiles too had heard the new commandment, and believed. The vision in the Book of Revelation is of the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. God will make His home, it says, with humanity:

He will live with them, and they shall be his people.
God himself will be with them, and he will be their God.
He will wipe away all tears from their eyes. There will
be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain.

The vision is one for all humanity. God is not partisan and so we should not be surprised that His love is for all and that He wants nothing more than for His love to

be lived among us. Jesus' commandment was a departure, a new vision: love one another selflessly and people will know that you are my disciples.

We have to live in a world in which there is a lot of human violence, some of it done in the name of religion. It is a world which is violent and in which there is a massive amount of suffering. It almost seems a Godless world. Bonhoeffer wrote, 'Before God and with God, we live without God.' We live in a world in which there are tears, death, grief, crying and pain. With the shadow of the cross becoming ever greater, Jesus said to His disciples, 'Love one another, not merely as you love yourself, but as I have loved you.' Jesus is worthy of our worship. 'If you don't love my God, I can't love you' is so wrong. I close with the words of Samuel Crossman:

My song is love unknown,
my Saviour's love to me,
love to the loveless shown, that they might lovely be.
Oh, who am I, that for my sake
my Lord should take frail flesh and die?

Amen.