Lessons 1 Corinthians 12: 14 - 31a  St Luke 4: 14 - 21

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Grant, we pray You, O God, the lively reception of Your truth, minds open to new possibilities, and hearts loving towards You; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Written in 1785, *Holy Willie's Prayer* is one of the better known works of the national bard. In part, Robert Burns offers a sarcastic critique of eighteenth century theology and, in particular, the doctrine of predestination. Have you heard of predestination? Do you care about predestination? In a word, predestination is the belief that, for His pleasure and glory, God determines the ultimate destiny of every single person and determined that destiny before each person was born. According to this view, each of us is predestined to go either to heaven or to hell and it does not depend our any merit of ours. In God's sight, we have no merit. There is nothing we can do or achieve that will be a surprise to God and nothing will change our ultimate destination. Burns wrote:

O Thou, wha in the Heavens dost dwell,
Wha, as it pleases best thysel',
Sends ane to heaven and ten to hell,
And no for ony guid or ill
    They've done afore thee!

You'll not hear a better rendering of the Scots anywhere. For His pleasure, God would send one to heaven and ten to hell and Burns, like any human being
informed by compassion and love, found the doctrine morally repulsive. Burns was not an atheist but he was not slow to criticise the Church, its hypocritical followers and much of its thinking.

Sadly, tragically, we can still hear sermons endorsing the doctrine of predestination. Its supporters will claim that it is there in the Bible. Well, maybe, but so too is patriarchy, misogyny and slavery. Predestination was picked up by the greatest of the Early Church Fathers, St Augustine, and it truly flowered under the French reformer, John Calvin. Hence, it made its way to Scotland. My point in using this illustration of predestination is not to mock the Bible, Augustine, Calvin or the Scottish church and neither I am celebrating the insight of the national bard. My point is to say that ideas within the Church, theological ideas, change over time and that we ought not to hold the excesses of a previous era against God. People can be genuine and, with the benefit of hindsight, mistaken; at the very least, ideas evolve. Albert Einstein, when he proposed his Theory of Relativity in 1915, thought that the Milky Way, our galaxy of a hundred billion stars, was the whole of the universe. The Hubble Telescope revealed that the Milky Way is just one of a hundred billion galaxies in the visible universe. Einstein was wrong, spectacularly wrong, but we would not hold that against him. His commitment to scientific discovery, his genius, secures him a place in human history.
So too in theology: theologians can be wrong. Augustine was wrong, Calvin was wrong. Their worldviews were very different from ours and much of their theology does not stand up in our post-Enlightenment and Darwinian world.

One difference, perhaps, between science and religion is that when science makes a new world-changing discovery, the previously held theories fall away. In religion, however, when there is a new theological break-through, many, for various reasons, still hold on to the previous mindset.

Arguably, the greatest living theologian today is the Swiss-born Roman Catholic Hans Kung. Kung says that since the birth of Christ there have been five paradigms, that is, five broad ways of thinking about Christ and being the Church. I’ll not go into any great details about them but they are: the apocalyptic era (up to 100AD), the Hellenistic era (from 100 to 500AD), the medieval Roman Catholic period (from c1000 to 1400AD), the Protestant Reformation (from 1500 towards 1800) and the Modern era from (1800 into the twentieth century). These five ways of thinking or paradigms are the evolution of thought and development within the Church. The more recent ones, the Roman Catholic paradigm together with the Protestant and Modern paradigm, have relied heavily on the authority of church institutions as well as the inerrancy of Scripture. Crucially, says Kung, we are now moving into a sixth paradigm, one in which institutional authority and the doctrinal inerrancy of Scripture are no longer sufficient to carry the message of the gospel. It is true
to say that preachers who scream the scheme of salvation at congregations, who talk about the fires of hell, the wrath of God and the predestination of the Elect make for better headlines but, for me, I am cautious of absolutist claims about God, doctrines and Scripture, I am circumspect about the spiritual or ethical wisdom of church institutions and, in our multi-faith world, I refuse to claim that Jesus of Nazareth is the only way to God.

What, then, will the sixth paradigm look like? What struck me about our Gospel lesson this morning was the Presence of the Spirit. We are told that 'Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee' and later Jesus quotes from the prophet Isaiah, in which He read, 'The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me.' The Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, is upon Jesus. In this passage of Scripture, it is perhaps the Spirit that is at the centre of the action. Quoting from Isaiah, Jesus goes on:

The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me,  
Because He has anointed Me  
to preach good news to the poor.....

In this context, the poor are not those who are materially poor. There is nothing blessed or virtuous about being painfully materially poor. Poverty is a curse and dehumanises everyone it touches. Jesus is not holding up the poor or poverty as a virtue. In this context, poor means poor in spirit. The Church of
Scotland minister, John Miller, whose parish was Easterhouse in Glasgow, says the 'poor in spirit' means the 'spirit of the poor'. He writes:

The poor are like this: they have no resources outside themselves. They have no wealth to spend, no property to sell, no bought house, nothing set aside for a 'rainy day'. They search down the sides of chairs for pennies for the children's bus fares. They have no slippers or dressing-gown if they are taken into hospital, no money to buy birthday or Christmas presents unless they go into debt......The poor often think of God, because there is no other help.

He goes on:

The spirit of the poor is found in others, others whose material circumstances may be quite different. All kinds of events can bring us face to face with our own fragility, our mortality, our utter dependence on the One who has given us life.....And Jesus affirms that those who have the spirit of the poor keep company with God.

Jesus, then, is not extolling the virtue of poverty. Rather, He is stressing depth of spirituality, our intimate relationship with the Holy. It is the poor's sense of utter vulnerability and dependence which Jesus is holding up as a spiritual virtue, if virtue is the right word. What will the sixth paradigm look like? I believe that personal spirituality will emerge as a central feature. This spirituality will not be doctrinally driven but rather rest on our spiritual encounter with the Holy, perhaps through the meditative, careful, sensitive reading of Scripture, or slowly gazing into an icon or practising stillness and silence. This spirituality will be marked by releasing the peace of sacredness within us. It is not that the past is to be jettisoned and never mentioned again
but rather, many of the doctrines and creeds of the past will be seen in their context, as statements about God and faith but of an earlier era.

This spirituality, because it is not doctrinally driven, unites us with human beings of other world faiths. In the news this month was Swami Vivekananda, the Bengali intellectual and Hindu mystic, who not only introduced many people in the West to yoga and meditation, promoted a very simple message: 'All religions are equal and God is inside everyone.' Vivekananda does not say that all religions are the same but that they are equal. It requires enormous spiritual depths to recognise, acknowledge and respect the wisdom and insight of other world faith and to see that, at their very core, is the Spirit Who empowered and led Jesus in Galilee. Vivekananda wanted people to discover the Prophet, the Buddha or the Christ inside themselves.

There is so much to say about this new sixth paradigm, but let me close with this. The evangelical Protestant philosopher, Alvin Plantinga, compares faith to a case where you are accused of a crime on the basis of very convincing evidence, but you know that you didn’t do it. For you, the immediate evidence of memory and that of your heart is not defeated by the public evidence against you, even though the witness of your memory and heart are not available to others. Our intuitive sense of God is beyond external scrutiny and beyond every doctrine to encapsulate it; our sense of God, our sense of the spiritual is
deeper than words. Without words, we can share that moment of encounter with others. In the sixth paradigm, silence will matter more than words. It will matter far more than it has ever meant. In the sixth paradigm, we are suspicious of words, of institutional authority and absolute claims about Scripture. God is beyond all definition, elusive yet wholly present. Simone Weil puts it this way:

A case of contradictories, both of them true. There is a God. There is no God. Where is the problem? I am quite sure that there is a God in the sense that I am sure my love is no illusion. I am quite sure there is no God, in the sense that I am sure there is nothing which resembles what I can conceive when I say that word.

Amen.