

**Sermon**

Sunday 24 September, 2017

Lessons

Exodus 16: 2 – 15

Philippians 1: 21 – 30

St Matthew 20: 1 – 16

*Prayer of Illumination*

Let us pray.

In You, O God, may we find immortality, union with Your Spirit, oneness, and fulfillment, wholeness and completion which this world cannot give. Amen.

Last Sunday I preached at Glenalmond College. In my sermon to pupils and staff, I began by saying that the one thing we need, the one essential thing we need in reading the Bible, is imagination. The margins in the Bible are the widest of any book: abundant space left for imagination. A prosaic reading of Holy Writ is death, while a creative interpretation of Scripture's sacred words is life. In our Old Testament story today, we hear the account of complaints by the Hebrew people. To Moses and Aaron, the Israelites said:

If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.

In the wilderness, the people starved: they were desperate for food.

There is a very human aspect to this story. When in Egypt, that constricted place, the people, the slaves, were eager to leave but

when in the wilderness and hungry they blamed their leaders; it was all the fault of Moses and Aaron! Do we blame our leaders for decisions we have made? In the wilderness, the people starved. With imagination, what are we to make of this ancient myth?

The wilderness is a place of testing; it is a barren place, one in which there is little, or nowhere to turn in our suffering. Turn that around, suffering can often be a wilderness, a place in which we feel alone, powerless, vulnerable, even worthless. Jesus faced His own challenges, His own inner demons, in the wilderness. We all do: we face our vulnerability alone, or so it can seem. In the wilderness, we may rage at God, we may feel abandoned by God, or believe that there is no God. With imagination, the story of the journey, the pilgrimage of the Hebrew people through the wilderness, is a story about human life, the tests and turmoil we face, and how we face them.

I am struck that, in the story, besides the miraculous provision of quails and bread, God is there, present with the people. In a crucial verse, we read, 'The whole congregation looked towards the wilderness, and the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud.' If read

with a prosaic or literal mindset, we may take it for granted: the people looked, they saw the wilderness and they saw a cloud. No! It is a mystical vision: it is the sort Jesus had when He was baptised, the sort Cleopas and his friend had on the Road to Emmaus and the same sort that Paul had on the Road to Damascus. These are inner visions: visions of the soul, of spiritual imagination. In the midst of suffering, with the inner eye, the eye of the heart, the whole congregation turned aside, looked towards the wilderness, into the deepest darkness, and there they glimpsed the glory of God, the *Shekinah*, the Sacred Presence. If we stop and look, we too can see the cloud: in our wilderness, in our suffering, in that darkest place (a cloud), we may see the Divine.

Writing in the 1980s, Rabbi Harold Kushner, whose teenage son died of a rapid-ageing disease, said that children who are sick should pray.

Kushner said:

They should pray for strength to bear what they have to bear. They should pray that sickness and its treatment not hurt them too much. They should pray as a way of talking out their fears without the embarrassment of having to say them out loud, and as a reassurance that they are not alone. God is close to them even late at night in the hospital when their parents have gone home and all the doctors have left. God is still with them even when they are so sick that their friends no longer come to visit.

The fear of pain and the fear of abandonment are perhaps the most troubling aspects of a child's illness, and prayer should be used to ease those fears.

In the wilderness, in the night, in the darkness and in the midst of suffering, God is present. Paradoxically, in the dark and deserted place, God is present. The story of the Hebrew people is that they saw the *Shekinah*, the Divine Presence, on their pilgrimage, in their suffering. The Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, said that spiritual practice is not a remote intellectual reflection on an idea or concept of God; it is a *seeking after* an experience of Presence. It is a disciplined craving for union, oneness and intimacy.

In his Letter to the Philippians, Paul said, 'For me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.' Through imprisonments, tortures and inner struggles, Paul said, 'To live is Christ, and to die is gain.' The persecutor Saul came to discover Christ within him; within his own soul he saw the *Shekinah*, the Holy of Holies. Dwelling in his own wilderness, his own darkness, Paul saw the Divine. Metaphorically, mystically, his soul was fed with quails and bread, fed by the Spirit who feeds us all.

The nineteenth century mystic, George Matheson, sought meaning *in* his moments of suffering. For Matheson, it was not simply that he sought God in suffering, but that his suffering meant something and led him further on his inner journey. Matheson said he sought the joy of harvest; in other words, that from the buried grain of his life harvest would come. In prayer, he said:

Reveal to me the meaning of my failures. Teach me the track of the path I deemed trackless. Show me the angel sitting on the tomb of my buried self. Show me that the man with whom I wrestled at Peniel was a man from heaven....Show me that there was manna in my desert, which even Canaan did not hold.

For Matheson, our wilderness experiences are as formative and as much of God as those on the mountain top. It is a profound theology of absolute trust.

When now we turn to the *Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard*. On the face of it, read literally, unimaginatively, it may appear to be about economics, workers' pay, zero hour contracts or bad management. No. The parables of Jesus are about one thing and one thing only: God. Jesus was intoxicated with the generosity, the magnanimity of the One He called Father. The parable is a story that for all people, whoever they are, however worthy or marginalized in

society, God's acceptance, embrace and love are unconditional and shared in full measure with all. At a time when the Roman Emperor was deemed the son of God, when deity resided in the powerful, Jesus told the beggar, the blind, the child and the woman, the Kingdom of Heaven is within *you*, the Shekinah is within you: you are a God-bearer. Read literally, the *Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard* makes no sense; it doesn't work. Metaphorically, it is a story about God's unconditional love for all: for Jews and Gentiles, for those who have followed Jesus for a long time and for those who have just started out on the journey. Like the quails and the bread, all shared equally, God's love is shared equally. Just as the *Parable of the Prodigal Son* is better rendered the *Parable of the Forgiving Father*, so the *Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard* is better as the *Parable of the Gracious Owner*.

In our time, for me, this parable is a lesson about God's relationship to the different world faiths. Whatever claims each may legitimately make about antiquity, whatever the rich and cultured heritage each may present, God's love for each one is equal. On Tuesday last, together with others from Mayfield Salisbury, I attended a Service of Worship at the Mandir, the Hindu Temple in Edinburgh. Standing

side by side with Hindus, Buddhists, Jews and other Christians, we worshipped and meditated through the chants and ritual of Hinduism. It is possible to find true unity despite great apparent differences. Unity is spiritual; it is of the heart. It is not narrowly doctrinal, which is of the head. With sympathy and love, it is possible to worship together: all share in God's love equally, all pursue inner peace, shalom or the Buddha nature.

The curse of religion is exclusivity: exclusivity is a sin. The Jewish scholar, Laura Bernstein, writes:

There is no uglier blemish on the face of religion than the running sore of exclusivism, filled with all the poison of religious arrogance and egotism.....

The world will one day belong to those who realise, as Hinduism teaches, that they are divine. Those who, as Buddhism reminds us, are truly awake, enlightened, and compassionate. Those who, as Islam declares, strive for justice and peace. Those who, as Judaism proclaims, seek righteousness and mercy and walk humbly with God. Those who, as Christianity announces, live and love in the world as Jeshu did.

Jesus was intoxicated with His consciousness of the One who fills all things, all worlds, all world faiths; who feeds each one equally and who is to be found not only on the mountain top but mysteriously, mystically, in human suffering. Amen.