**Sermon** Sunday 26 March 2017

Lessons 1 Samuel 16: 1- 13 Ephesians 5: 8 -14

St John 9: 1 – 12

*Prayer of Illumination*

Let us pray.

Holy God, Mystery impenetrable, luminous darkness, open our eyes that we may see You clearly, Your Spirit in all things and all things in You. Bless our meditations; they are gifts from You. Amen.

John Hull, theologian and author, was Professor of Religious Education at the University of Birmingham. He died in August 2015 aged 80 years. An Australian by birth, Hull moved to England at the age of 24 to study theology at Cambridge. For over twenty years, Hull was editor of the *British Journal of Religious Education*. He wrote numerous books on religious education and was a guest speaker at conferences across the world: Canada, Germany, Ireland, Hungary, Malta, Norway, Taiwan and the United States. In 1983, at the age of 48, Hull became blind. He had been struggling over several years with ever-increasing dark, disc-shaped areas obscuring his vision. Hull had to learn to live as a blind person: how to teach at the university and carry out his research, and what it meant to be a father of a small child, but unable to see him.

At the time he went blind, Hull’s son, Thomas, was three years old. Thomas had to learn a new way of relating to his father. Hull said that he trained his son with the expression ‘Show Daddy’. This meant that whatever Thomas had in his hands he should hand over to his father knowing, that he would get it straight back. This was different to ‘Give it to Daddy’. If Hull said, ‘Show Daddy’, Thomas would take his father’s outstretched finger and place it on the toy car or whatever he was holding, and let his father feel the shape of the object. There was a wonderful moment when, holding a book, Thomas remarked, ‘Daddy can’t read this’ and then holding his father’s braille book, said, ‘Thomas can’t read this.’

In 1984, at a church service, Hull met with a faith-healing friend. His friend tried very hard to get him to carry a pocket Bible. He told Hull, “God said, ‘Let the word go with you.’” Hull said that he had to carry many things in his pockets and could not carry a Bible. Finally, exasperated by Hull’s refusal, his friend said that if he carried the Bible his sight would be restored. His friend told him that sin was the cause of his blindness; his sin was pride and resistance to God’s Word. Hull told his friend, ‘I do not accept any of your ideas…..You are advising me to accept magical, superstitious practices.’ Hull refused to carry the pocket Bible.

Three years after he became blind, Hull attended Mass in Notre Dame Cathedral in Montreal with his older son Michael. The organ is one of the most famous in North America and it creates a powerful and beautiful sound. Many times in those three years Hull had wondered if his blindness was a gift. He is clear: he did not want to be blind and he would not wish blindness on any one. Still, he asked himself, if his blindness was a gift. Wrapped in the divine music of Notre Dame Cathedral, Hull found himself saying, ‘I accept the gift, I accept the gift.’ He said:

I was filled with a profound sense of worship. I felt that I was

in the very presence of God, that the giver of the gift had drawn

near to me to inspect his handiwork.

Hull said of that moment and of God:

I knew that he is infinitely great, with a mysterious beauty

which is beyond all my understanding. I felt that he had

paused, for a moment, and that soon he must be about his own

strange work in worlds beyond my imagining.

He had, as it were, thrown his cloak of darkness around me

from a distance, but had now drawn near to seek a kind of

reassurance from me that everything was all right, that he had

not misjudged the situation…..’It’s all right’ I was saying to him.

Together with his son Michael, Hull walked forward to receive the bread. As he did so, he understood the strangeness of the little wafer:

This is also a strange gift, I thought. Is not the strangeness

of this little wafer of the same kind as the strangeness of that

other gift? This also is broken, and it breaks those who eat it.

As long as I have his bread within me and his cloak around me,

I will live in him, and he in me.

In his meditation on Psalm 139, Hull said that the most important thing about waking up each day is not the morning but the presence: the presence of loved ones certainly but, Hull said, the Presence of ‘the One who knows me, whether I wake or sleep, for I am still with him.’ The psalmist said, ‘When I awake I am still with thee.’

Hull’s description of faith is the real thing. It is only when we close our eyes that we truly begin to see. There are numerous stories in Scripture about blindness but they surely are mostly concerned with inner sight or insight into the Sacred. Our Gospel lesson this morning is the story of a man born blind, a man whose blindness many believed was caused by sin, either his own sin or that of his parents. Jesus refuted that accepted theology, refuted it utterly. The story, the carefully crafted faith narrative, is to do with seeing God, seeing Jesus, seeing the Divine in this world and opening ourselves to Eternity. St Paul said to the Church at Ephesus, ‘Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.’ The apostle was not speaking of some distance ethereal experience, but of now, in the present moment. Be aware, he said, that you are in Christ – now - and Christ is in you. In this life, you already possess eternity; you are already one with the Eternal; you are already raised from the dead. In the Book of Samuel, the LORD said to Samuel, ‘The LORD does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.’

In the Gospel of St John, the man born blind is asked by those who can only see the world of matter, ‘How were your eyes opened?’ The entire passage is about inner sight: seeing Jesus with the eyes of the soul. The story is not magical superstition. For me, the mud takes us back to the Book of Genesis, to the creation of humanity from the ground, to a story in which we are reminded that we are God-bearers, we are made in the image of God, given life by the *ruach*, the breath of God. The saliva is a symbol of life. The blind man is touched and changed by the soul and essence of Jesus. It is a picture of spiritual intimacy: we are to let ourselves be in the presence of Jesus, touched by the hand of Christ and filled by His Spirit. This is faith; this is the real thing.

What a world away this is from the deluded, perhaps sick, man who caused such suffering at Westminster this week. Later today I shall be speaking at Annandale Mosque, a guest of the Muslim community invited to speak on Mothers’ Day. For the Muslim community as well as for us, it is a day intended for happiness, a celebration of family and a time to live out some of the cherished values we share. Of all the speeches and tweets about the attack on Westminster, I was particularly struck by the words of Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury. Speaking in the House of Lords, Welby said:

Yesterday afternoon, one of our own security staff at Lambeth

Palace, a Muslim, arrived at the gate having been missed by the

vehicle very narrowly, and spent time helping those who had

been injured……

I’d also like to convey to the House messages I’ve received

through the night from faith leaders around the world, of

sympathy and support, and from faith leaders across this

country, who want the House and Parliament, and particularly

its staff and those who have suffered to know how much those

people are in their hearts and minds.

But I want in terms of values, to refer to something that seems

to me to go deeper, to something that is really at the foundation

of our own understanding of what our society is about, and to

do that in three very simple, very brief pictures.

The first is of a vehicle being driven across Westminster Bridge

by someone who had a perverted, nihilistic, despairing view of

objectives of what life is about, of what society is about, that

could only be fulfilled by death and destruction.

The second is of that same person a few minutes later, on a

stretcher or on the ground, being treated by the very people

he had sought to kill.

The third is of these two Houses, where profound

disagreement, bitter disagreement, angry disagreement is dealt

with not with violence, not with despair, not with cruelty, but

with discussion, with reason and with calmness.

Welby said that these three pictures point to the very deepest values in our society. The faith we share is a journey into God seeking the peace, the shalom, that only the Sacred can give. The Muslims I know seek that same peace.

Amen.