

Sermon

Sunday 5 May 2019

Lessons

Acts 9: 1 – 9

Revelation 5: 11 – 14

St John 21: 1 – 9

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Light of the first day, Light of Wisdom, and Light of the human soul, bless our meditations with Your luminous darkness, that our hearts may burn within us like those of Cleopas and his friend. Amen.

‘Though his eyes were open, he could see nothing. For three days, he was without sight.’ It was as he approached Damascus that Saul encountered the Risen Christ. Persecutor of the church, the people of the Way, Saul journeyed to Damascus to find and arrest, men or women, who were followers of Jesus of Nazareth. With zeal, Saul promised the High Priest he would bring to Jerusalem any followers of Jesus he found, bound if necessary.

As he walked along, a light from heaven flashed around him. Dazzled and blinded, Saul fell to the ground and, once on his knees, he heard a voice. Following this moment of mystical

encounter, Saul was helped to his feet. 'Though his eyes were open, he could see nothing'. After three days of physical blindness, Saul regained his sight and, it is said, was filled with the Holy Spirit: 'the scales fell from his eyes'. Saul, the persecutor, becomes Paul, the apostle of Christ.

In the Hebrew Bible, in the Book of Ezekiel, the prophet is the first to have a vision of God's glory. God's *kavod*, God's glory or Presence dazzled Ezekiel: light, fire and splendour were all around. In the Book of Daniel, in a vision, the prophet saw One whose face was like lightning and the prophet heard a voice speak. Daniel fell to the ground. In the inter-testamental book, 4 Maccabees, the governor of Syria, Apollonius fell to the ground, onto the floor of the temple, when lightning, a light flashing from heaven, dazzled him; he fell down, half dead.

The vivid and dramatic story of Saul's encounter with Jesus is similar to others we find in Scripture. The broad theme is

of physical sight, blindness, and spiritual sight, or spiritual insight. On the Road to Emmaus, Cleopas and his friend encounter Jesus. As they walked along with Jesus, we are told that 'their eyes were kept from recognising him'. It is only at the climax of the story that 'their eyes were opened and they recognised him'.

It would be wrong in any sense to idealise physical blindness. In the nineteenth century, in her poem *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning made the central character, Romney Leigh, blind. She said, 'He has to be blinded....to be made to see'. In his book, *Blindness and the Blind*, the Victorian writer William Hanks Levy said that Milton could not have written *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* as a sighted man. Levy said that the only other author equal to that of Milton was Homer, and he too was blind. The blind minister of Innellan, George Matheson, said, 'We can only get our inner eye enlightened by having

the outer eye shaded.' He encouraged his readers to practise stillness. Matheson said:

The burden and heat of the day are hard to bear, and impossible to bear without the strength of the Spirit.....Enter for one blessed hour into the secret of His pavilion, and He will send thee a flash of light that will keep thee all day.

Light and darkness, sight and blindness, are central to many spiritual stories in Scripture. In the Gospel of St John, in the final resurrection appearance, apparition, of the Risen Christ, the disciples encounter Jesus on the shore, on the beach by the Sea of Tiberius. It was after a night of fishing, just at daybreak, that Jesus stood by the water's edge; the disciples did not recognise Him. We have a beautiful image of the emerging sunrise, of dazzling light being born. It is still mostly dark, yet the morning light is strong, too strong directly to look at. It seems implicit in Scripture that many 'appearances' of God, of Christ, are not visible to the outer eye; we see God with the inner eye, with the outer eye shaded.

In the Book of Exodus, the prophet, the great lawgiver, Moses prayed that he would see God's glory; that he would perceive God's Presence. In response, God granted a partial vision; hidden in the cleft of a rock, Moses saw God's back as God passed by but not God's face. As Moses descended Mount Sinai, his face shone and radiated with light.

In the Jewish tradition, it is said that Moses is illumined not by what he *sees* of God but by what he *cannot* see or know. The rabbis suggest that the concealment of God's face forces Moses to use his own imagination to discover God within himself; Moses must reach deep inside himself to see God. It is from the experience of *self-insight* that Moses is illumined.

Religious tradition, the experience of God, and the possibilities of our encounter with the Divine, the Mystery of the Eternal, are more subtle, infinitely more nuanced, than

any physical light appearing in the sky! In his poem, *The Absence*, the Welsh poet, the late R S Thomas, begins:

It is this great absence
that is like a presence, that compels
me to address it without hope
of a reply. It is a room I enter

from which someone has just
gone, the vestibule for the arrival
of one who has not yet come.

Thomas ends:

What resource have I
other than the emptiness without him of my whole
being, a vacuum he may not abhor?

In the Gospel of John, in the spiritual story of Jesus on the shore and the disciples in the boat, it is the Beloved Disciple, the disciple whom Jesus loved especially, who first recognised Jesus. Earlier, it had been the Beloved Disciple who, on entering the empty tomb, was the first to believe. On that first Easter morning, while it was still dark, gazing into emptiness, into the darkness of the cave, the Beloved Disciple saw and believed. It was in the dark, as if physically

blind, the Beloved Disciple believed. Now, from the boat, before any of the others, the Beloved Disciple *sees* Jesus. Through the rich narratives of Scripture, the ancients are telling us that inner sight, seeing with the inner eye, is far more profound, a far greater theophany or manifestation of God, than anything the outer eye could ever possibly register! God is born within us; Christ is raised within us; and the Spirit dwells within us.

In the Gospel story, following the direction by Jesus to cast their nets to the right side of the boat, the disciples catch many fish. Why the right side of the boat? In the Jewish tradition, in the *Midrash*, it is believed that when God created the Garden of Eden it was created at God's right hand. At God's left hand, God created Gey-hinnom or Gehenna. It was in Gehenna that the Jewish king, Ahaz sacrificed his sons; sons born to pagan wives or concubines. Gehenna was the destination of the wicked. The Garden of Eden was the place where humanity lived at one, in harmony

with God. In the Gospel of St Matthew, in Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats, the sheep will be put to the right side of the shepherd, while the goats to the left side.

In Jewish mysticism, the sea is a symbol of all the nations.

The immense catch of fish is, for me, a symbol of those who see Jesus, those who look to Jesus, and those who are utterly dependent on Him for life. We do not have to be monks or live a terribly religious and pious life to feel ourselves to be sustained by God for our every breath and nourished by the life of Jesus. The writer, C S Lewis, said, 'I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.'

The light of Christ within us is the light by which we see and live our whole life. In a sense, we are the disciples in that boat making our way, together and individually, to Jesus; we are the fish lured by the attraction of Jesus, by the magnetism of His life; and we are people of faith, whose faith

depends upon subtleties and nuances. God dwells in the dark; like Moses, we will only see when we use our imagination, our inner sight, to perceive God.

Amen.