Sermon
Sunday 8th September 2013

Lessons
Jeremiah 18: 1 - 11
St Luke 14: 25 - 33

Prayer of Illumination
Let us pray.

Speak to our hearts, O God. Lead us in the way of humility. Teach, cleanse, guide and comfort us. Give us grace to receive Your Word, to cherish and revere it; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Jesus said, 'Whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple.'
St Luke 14: 33

If taken literally, Jesus' call that we forsake all, everything, is one that few of us could meet. Few of us would want to meet it. 'Whoever of you' means 'everyone of you' and 'forsake' means renounce and 'say goodbye to'. Jesus calls those who would follow Him to 'complete renunciation', to 'absolute poverty'. I have never forgotten the sermon delivered at Mayfield Salisbury by the American preacher, Fleming Rutledge. Fleming was reflecting on the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The priest and the Levite passed by but the Samaritan stopped, helped the man lying injured at the side of the road, and took care of him. Fleming said, whatever else the parable means, it cannot be that we are required to help everyone in need. If it did, she said, very soon we would have no money, no energy, our life would start to fall apart, and we would inevitably be neglecting our family and friends. Jesus calls His
disciples, those who would follow Him, to 'forsake all' and walk the road of 'absolute poverty', of 'complete renunciation'. What does this mean?

There are beautiful people who have perhaps taken Jesus at His word, literally. The 'Saint of Calcutta', Mother Teresa, devoted her whole life to personal poverty and serving those in great material and spiritual need. Malcolm Muggeridge once said of her, 'She glowed with a kind of luminosity'. Once, in a letter to the Archbishop of Calcutta, Mother Teresa, said, 'I made a vow to God......to give God anything He may ask - 'Not to refuse Him anything'. For these 17 years I have tried [to be faithful to that vow]....I wanted to give God something very beautiful...without reserve.' She was truly a saint, but is this the sort of life to which Jesus calls all of us? The truth is, is it not, the Good Samaritan was only able to help the injured man because he had money to do so and, similarly, it is the generosity of many people around the world that helps the Missionaries of Charity to carry out their incredible work. What does Jesus mean when He calls His followers to 'forsake all' and 'walk the road of absolute poverty'?

In speaking of this great call, Jesus warns, 'If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple.' If taken literally, at face value, Christians would be amongst the most divisive and dysfunctional of all people
on the planet. Some may feel we are just that but, seriously, what would such a lifestyle to for our mental, physical, emotional and spiritual health? 'Forsake all', 'walk the road of absolute poverty' and 'completely renunciation': what does this mean?

I believe that Jesus was calling His disciples and followers to a different way of seeing the world, a different theology and a way of living with a different value system. It seems to me perfectly straight-forward that no one in their right mind can abandon their job, commit themselves to absolute poverty and turn their back on their family - spouse and children. What sort of morality is that? I believe Jesus was and is calling us to a different way of seeing, thinking and living. He was a Spirit person, a mystic, and a man for whom firsthand experiences of the Holy were frequent. He taught His disciples to see and feel the Presence of God and said to those on the street whom He met that the Kingdom of God is at hand, right there, present with them. Jesus taught that the Transcendent, the Sacred, the Holy, is within us. The fourteenth century German theologian, philosopher and mystic, the master of mystics, Meister Eckhart, said, 'What is today? Today is eternity.' Jesus and the many mystics who followed Him, as well as the gospel writers, understood that faith is a way of seeing and understanding the reality of the world. It means seeing more deeply than the surface, more deeply than the material, more deeply than
science and more deeply than what the five senses can tell us. What does it mean to 'forsake all'?

This week I watched Allan Little interview Richard Holloway on BBC Hardtalk. Holloway describes himself as being on the 'inside' of the Church. He spoke about the things that became for him his points of departure from the Anglican institution, namely, the role of women in the church and the oppression or homophobic abuse of gay people. While understanding the difficulties faced by the Anglican church and its leadership, he said when they opted to put unity and institutional power before justice and truth something inside him died. Eloquent as ever, Holloway said the religion uses stories to explore meaning. He said human beings are obviously in the world, of the world - from dust we come and to dust we will return - but we are also self-conscious beings with a sense of transcendence: in a sense, we are different from the rest of the universe. Religion, he says, seeks to give meaning to that division or tension. He acknowledges that it is a category mistake to interpret religion in the same way as we do science. He says he is not sure about God but remains committed and attracted to Jesus. In some sense, he is a prophet of our time.

In his book, Eternal Life: A New Vision, the former Bishop of Newark, John Shelby Spong, makes much the same point. Spong describes the Bible as the
world's 'most misunderstood book with most of the misunderstanding coming from traditional believers.'

With incredulity, he says, 'I sometimes wonder how it is that anyone could read the story of Jesus' life as the canonical gospels portray it and ever think that the gospel writers intended their words to be understood literally.'

Bluntly, Spong writes:

Symbolic language is obviously present in the very familiar story of Jesus' birth. Do virgins really conceive? Do angels sing to hillside shepherds?...Do stars wander through the sky so slowly that magi can follow them, stopping along the way at the palace of the king, then at a home in Bethlehem, to guide our human travellers?...No one seems aware that Matthew will later tell us that this regal child was in fact the son of a carpenter.

Turning to the death and resurrection of Jesus, Spong says that, taken literally, the language is stretched beyond credibility:

Did the sun literally go dark over all the earth while Jesus lingered on his cross from twelve noon to three in the afternoon?...Did the veil in the temple that separated the holy place from the holy of holies actually split from top to bottom at the moment of Jesus' death?...Did an objective earthquake accompany his death?...Did the removal of the great stone [at the tomb] really require an intervening angelic being who came out of the sky?

Spong's list of doubts about the historicity of the gospels goes on and on. It seems to me self-evident that the stories in the gospels are faith narratives, Jewish myths, to point us to the reality beyond this material world. It is inside us, in the consciousness, in the mind and the soul, that we encounter the Holy.

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1 John Shelby Spong  *Eternal Life: A New Vision*  174
2 Ibid., 174
3 Ibid., 174f
We can touch Transcendence in this life and be touched by it but it requires no magic, no law-breaking miracles, no belief in a supernatural, external deity and no suspension of our intellect and reason.

In the West, in Scotland and in Edinburgh, the institutional churches have passed the point of decline and are now disintegrating. On the whole, the institutional churches cling to 'Christendom' and crave the power that that brings: the leadership want power and status, hierarchy, conformity and the status quo. It is preoccupied with propositional teaching: doctrine defines us. But, Jesus calls us to forsake all, to complete renunciation and absolute poverty. I believe that today, as in Jesus' day, He is calling us to a different way of seeing the world, to a different theology and a different way of living. Jesus is calling us to abandon, once and for all, the God of atheism, the supernatural god, who bursts into history, favours some and not others, is full of wrath and threatens us with punishment now and in eternity. We need to say that we do not believe in that god. We need to say that Scripture is story and that the literal interpretation of Scripture is heresy. Doctrinal teaching, right thinking, are signposts on the way but displaced by experiential encounter with the Holy.

I listen to colleagues in the Church of Scotland and elsewhere searching for a new strategy, a groundbreaking new methodology for mission. The assumption is that if only we get the methodology right people will start coming to church.
We are wasting our time! It is not the method but the message which is the problem. Shelby Spong says that resurrection is an event of *inner history*; it is in the consciousness that we encounter the Spirit of Jesus; it is here that we can feel the fundamental shift in our life. Jesus is located at the centre of our being. I believe that Jesus taught His disciples just this: that the Holy lives within us and, as we seek that through spiritual practice and journey, we begin, slowly, tentatively, to see the world differently, think differently and live differently - God is now at the centre of our life. The mystics have much to teach. We can draw on the past. Calvin said that in Communion it is clear that we do not eat the actual body and blood of Jesus or that the bread and wine become human flesh. He said that we need to receive the elements of Bread and Wine spiritually: digesting the Bread and Wine means to take the Spirit of Jesus into our soul, that He is in us and we are in Him. We become one.

Forsaking all, complete renunciation and absolute poverty to me mean that we must forego the trappings of Christendom, the desire of the institutional churches for power and status; we must forego supernatural theology and any sense that God is an external being; and we must forego the doctrinal teachings of the past *as if* they were absolute truth. Absolute poverty means abandoning images of God and entering the cloud of unknowing, the darkness in which God dwells. Part of the future for the Church lies in enabling and empowering individuals to encounter the Holy within, through the practice of prayer, silence,
pilgrimages, labyrinths, music and singing. I believe in life beyond death, life in the consciousness or mind of God, because I believe I live in that reality now. Meister Eckhart said, 'What is today? Today is eternity.'

Amen.