

Sermon

Sunday 31 May 2020

Lessons

Acts 2: 1 – 13

St John 20: 19 - 23

A strong, driving wind rushed through the house. Flames like tongues of fire spread to every corner. On the day of Pentecost, the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to talk in other tongues! In the mystical Gospel of St John, in the upper room the Risen Christ gave the disciples His blessing of peace, *shalom*, and ‘breathed’ into them. Jesus said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’.

Earlier this week I shared in a Zoom conversation to mark the Jewish festival of *Shavuot*. Together with Shaykh Rabbani and Rabbi Rose, we explored ‘revelation’ in our respective Abrahamic traditions. Each of us, as Jew, Christian and Muslim, affirmed the central importance of our written Scriptures: Tanakh, Christian Bible and Qur’an. In each tradition, we believe our Scriptures to be a revelation: an encounter with God. Shaykh Rabbani described personal spiritual practice within Islam as a means of receiving the spiritual energy experienced by the Prophet. For me, the discussion itself, the sharing of spiritual insights, the deep listening to how others account for their faith and their experiences of God, is a Pentecostal moment. If we listen with open hearts to the Spirit moving through the stories told in the world’s rich religious traditions and, with the eye of the heart, see the Spirit’s beauty in what others say of the

Eternal, we are living out Pentecost today. Christianity does not own the Holy Spirit: the Spirit speaks through Christianity but is multi-lingual.

Within the spiritual resource of Scripture, Christians place central importance upon Jesus. For me, deeper than doctrinal and philosophical formulae, it is encounter with Jesus in and through the Gospels, *seeing* the Risen Christ, that shapes our soul. The Bible, the written Word of God, is eternally fruitful and with careful, slow,

meditative reading of Scripture we can hear the Spirit speak through the words in syllables of silence. The Scottish mystic George Matheson said that of all books the Bible left the widest margins for imagination. Revelation is always an inner experience: an intuition, dream or vision. Jesus often sought the quiet



solitude of the mountain. At its root, revelation or encounter with the Spirit is not limited to Scripture or even the majestic writing of spiritual masters: *awareness* of the Sacred is also felt through nature. The eighteenth century English poet William Cowper (picture) wrote, ‘God made the country, and man made the town’. Albeit not often within our reformed tradition, Christianity reads the book of nature as a revelation of God; a means of encountering the Divine.

Over these past few ‘lockdown’ weeks I have returned to the life and poetry of William Wordsworth. Disillusioned by the growing intolerance of the French Revolution, Wordsworth turned to inner change and maturation to find fulfilment in his life. In his autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*, he wrote of the Spirit, the transcendent joy, he found in nature:

Thus did my days pass on, and now at length
 From Nature and her overflowing soul
 I had received so much that all my thoughts
 Were steeped in feeling; I was only then
 Contented when with bliss ineffable
 I felt the sentiment of Being spread
 O’er all that moves, and all that seemeth still,
 O’er all, that, lost beyond the reach of thought
 And human knowledge, to the human eye
 Invisible, yet liveth to the heart,
 O’er all that leaps, and runs, and shouts, and sings,
 Or beats the gladsome air, o’er all that glides
 Beneath the wave, yea, in the wave itself
 And might depths of waters. Wonder not
 If such my transports were; for in all things
 I saw one life, and felt that it was joy.

Wordsworth wrote of the joy that lifted him out of himself. A fleeting moment, he had heard the Spirit speak in a different tongue and it filled him with joy. Through nature, Wordsworth encountered the Most Real. Perhaps on occasion on a balcony, empty golf course, breeze-stroked beach or among mature trees, if we are present to the moment, we also may feel that sense of feeling, of awareness and

consciousness, that we are caught up in so much more than this life, this world or universe.

Last Sunday I listened to ‘Private Passions’ on Radio 3 with special guest Brian Greene. Greene is an American theoretical physicist, mathematician and string theorist at the University of Columbia. He



spoke movingly of Bach, Brahms, Beethoven and his father Alan, who was a musician. Author of *The Elegant Universe* and *Until the End of Time*, Greene described a fleeting, mystical encounter he experienced in – of all places - a Starbucks café. Not a person of faith or, at least, not one who belongs to organised religion,

Greene spoke of being ‘lifted’ by the cosmos with a sense of oneness, harmony, beauty, coherence and delight not only that we live but that we do so in a universe that can be measured and understood. For Greene, it was a memorable and life-enhancing transcendent moment.

Elsewhere, he celebrates the fact that we can explore how the universe evolved from the beginning, enjoy the great beauty of the Mona Lisa and be carried to a transcendent place as we listen to Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. Greene believes that in different ways humanity seeks to achieve eternity because we know that we will die and in the distant future so too will our universe: the impulse

to devote a lifetime to mathematics and physics, a search for laws and truths, is rooted in ‘the enchantment’ that a mathematical proof might stand forever. For Greene, only through art can we enter ‘the secret universe of another’. It is through artistic imagination that we can ‘fly from star to star’: a journey that cannot be navigated by ‘direct and conscious methods’. As a physicist and mathematician, Greene is concerned with the material universe yet stretches to articulate transcendence. Is this another one of the languages used by the Holy Spirit?

The seventeenth century mystic John Everarde said that, rather than read the Scriptures literally, we are to read them so that they become truth for us, come alive for us, when the stories happen or take place *inside* us. To treat the Bible as mere history is to remain trapped in the letter, in the words themselves but, to be fulfilled in us, Scripture needs to be lived in our life and experience. Christ needs to be born in us, live His life in us and let His Spirit of Truth dwell deep inside. In the Jewish *Kabbalah*, in prayer and reading the Torah, we inhale and exhale the Breath of God. The Church reformers spoke of the Spirit as the ‘inner Word’. Another tongue of the Transcendent!

In 2009, the then Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams blessed a new icon of the Resurrection of Jesus at St Andrew Holburn Church, London. The icon is a vibrantly coloured depiction of Jesus descending to the world of the dead. Jesus stands alongside Adam

and Eve: He is present in the world of darkness. In the icon, Adam and Eve are not the young, innocent, naked couple we are used to seeing. They have grown old. The point is that Jesus, the Risen, Ascended Christ, the Spirit of Jesus, enters humanity as it is with its knowledge of good and evil, scarred by life, history and personal experiences. Adam and Eve have lined faces. Christ enters into us, stands with us. Christ does not wipe out history, pain and failure but meets us as who we are. Another tongue of the Spirit: God within us speaking to us in a language only our heart can hear. Pentecost is not history: it is today, in you and me now.

Amen.