

Sermon

Sunday 21 June 2020

Lesson

Psalm 86: 1 – 10

The exquisite *St Alban's Psalter* was created in the twelfth century at



the Cathedral and
Abbey Church of
St Alban in

Hertfordshire.

Alban is believed
to be the first

Christian martyr in Britain. A resident of Verulamium in Roman Britain, Alban lived during a period of persecution at the end of the third century. The story goes that, fleeing the tyranny of Rome, a Christian priest sought sanctuary in Alban's house. Over the days that followed, Alban became so deeply moved by the faith and devotion of the priest that he converted to Christianity. During those tense and fearful few days, the priest had offered prayers day and night. When, finally, Roman soldiers came to Alban's home to arrest the priest, Alban put on the priest's cloak and clothing and surrendered himself. Standing before a judge, Alban was given the opportunity to recant his faith. In reply, affirming his faith, he spoke words which are still used today in prayer at the Cathedral bearing his name: 'I worship and adore the true and living God who created all things'. At his execution before he was beheaded, Alban was thirsty

and prayed to God for water; at that moment a spring burst forth at his feet. Water is a symbol of life, new life. In this creative hagiography, we see the immense life-giving peace that prayer can yield.

Both the priest and Alban prayed in the most testing circumstances. Over the centuries, in Judaism and Christianity, people of faith have turned again and again to the Psalms. The Book of Psalms, or (from the Greek) the Psalter, is a compilation of 150 songs: songs of thanksgiving, praise, lament and for royal occasions. Originally written for use in the temple in Jerusalem, the psalms were sung by Jesus and quoted by St Paul. We are very familiar with the many composers who have drawn upon the psalms over the centuries, including Bach, and, in our tradition, the metrical psalms have occupied a central place in public worship.

The former Cabinet minister, Jonathan Aitken, turned to the psalms on his first night in Belmarsh Prison. Convicted for perjury and sentenced to eighteen months imprisonment, Aitken said that in his prison cell he felt 'terrified, utterly helpless and totally vulnerable'. His fear inflamed his raw nerves into agonising pain. On his knees, he tried to pray. Some months earlier, he had been given a booklet entitled, 'Praying the Psalms'. It was 8th June and he turned to the psalm set for that day. It was Psalm 130:

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.
O Lord, hear my voice.
Let your ears be attentive
to my cry for mercy.

Aitken said that in those few moments, he felt ‘a warm and comforting wave of reassurance’ flood over him: ‘Suddenly I realised that I was not as lonely, scared, helpless or vulnerable as I had thought’. Like the priest, Alban and a thousand thousand people over hundreds of generations, Aitken found peace, *shalom*, is the solace of Scripture.

Mindful that we follow in the prayer-soaked footsteps of Columba’s monastic life, the monks took seriously St Paul’s injunction in 1 Thessalonians ‘to pray continually’. Through prayer, manual work and spiritual reading, they worshipped God. The psalms were chanted, recited, copied, studied and prayed. For me, the point of all that intense spiritual activity was to arrive at a moment of stillness or inner silence. *We* may catch that silence, that subtle sense of the Divine, through the means used by the monks or through our quiet appreciation of nature, music, or intimate friendship. During this time of lockdown, many people have spoken of the healing and joy they have found in the cessation of human activity. One writer says, ‘The richness of this Spring has fed my faith, almost more than anything’. In praying, in meditatively reading the Psalter, we are not

listening for a voice so much as a sensing a warmth, a calm, intuitive peace. There is no eloquence greater than the silence of God.

The parish priest, lecturer and spiritual director, the late John ‘Jock’ Dalrymple, wrote:

Intimacy in prayer comes when we find that we can remain in communion with God without any particular desire to move on to some business with him. We are content just to stay with God, conscious that he loves us, trying to respond with our own love. We dwell with God, and he with us. It is difficult to put into words what happens when prayer simplifies like this. One reason for this is that there is a progression towards wordless silence in prayer, and silence is not easy to speak about. Progress in intimacy becomes progress towards silence. This happens in all human friendship, and the divine friendship of prayer follows a similar pattern.

In our lesson for today, Psalm 86, let the words be personal and ponder the poetic phrases which suggest themselves. We need not search for an original meaning but rather let the words still our hearts, that we may draw close to the Divine who is already intimately, tenderly, close to us:

Bow down thine ear, O Lord, hear me....
 Preserve my soul....
 Be merciful unto me, O Lord: for I cry unto thee daily.
 Give ear, O Lord, unto my prayer;
 and attend to the voice of my supplications....

In the day of my trouble I will call upon thee:

for thou wilt answer me.

Among the gods there is none like unto thee, O Lord;
neither are there any works like unto thy works.

Thou art God alone.

At times, perhaps, we may feel silly or self-conscious in praying. We wonder, 'Is God listening?' 'Is there a God?' 'Am I making a fool of myself?' 'God knows my thoughts anyway, so why pray?' Or, 'I prefer to keep God at a distance'. All such questions and doubts are normal and healthy. Like riding a bicycle, praying takes practice and patience. Prayer is not an external activity, but an intimate conversation of the heart. The saying of prayers - and the silent listening - create 'a chapel of the mind and spirit'. The thirteenth century German mystic, St Gertrude the Great, prayed:

Come Holy Spirit, come God of love,
fill my poor heart.
Set me on fire that I may love You.
Enlighten me that I may know You.
Draw me, that I may find all my delight
and joy in You,
and make me capable of enjoying You.

Whether alone or in company, in happiness or grief, in times of fear, frustration, anxiety, disappointment or personal failure, God, the Eternal, the Holy One, the Silence at the centre of all things, is with us. I remember as a teenager reading the Psalms for the first time and, though there was much I did not understand, nevertheless, I came

again and again upon a phrase or sentiment that spoke to me, that I understood, and which comforted me. I can still feel that comfort today. This is the inaudible, imperceptible, tender breath of God. Let us draw strength from the Psalms, from the phrases that speak to us. The physicist and theologian Blaise Pascal said he heard God say, 'Thou wouldst not be seeking Me if thou didst not possess Me'.

Let me close with some beautiful words penned by a Franciscan hermit who lives in Cornwall:

I sit in silence.
I sit in silence to start my day.
I sit in silence to forget me and open to God.
I sit in silence to receive Divine wisdom.
I sit in silence to let God pray in me.
I sit in silence to be transformed by God.
I sit in silence.

Amen.