

## Sermon

Sunday 13 December 2020

Lesson

St John 1: 6 – 8, 19 – 28

Earlier this week, I conducted the funeral of a man whose favourite hymn was *This is my Father's world*. Written by the American clergyman, Maltie Babcock, the first verse runs:

This is my Father's world,  
And to my listening ears  
All nature sings, and round me rings  
The music of the spheres.  
This is my Father's world:  
I rest me in the thought  
Of rocks and trees, of skies and seas--  
His hand the wonders wrought.

Babcock was born in 1858 and died on a return journey from the Holy Land in 1901, aged 42. He was father to two children, both of whom sadly died in infancy and, throughout his life, he struggled with depression. Much lauded by leading churchmen of his day, Babcock is honoured by a magnificent stained-glass window in the large Gothic-style Brown Memorial Presbyterian Church, Baltimore. In a biography of Babcock, we are told that he was 'pre-eminently a preacher'. Described also as a clear thinker and fluent speaker, he was gifted with remarkable 'personal magnetism'. He published no books but was said to have 'lived or sung his thoughts'. In the fly-leaf of his pocket Bible, found after his death, Babcock had penned these words:

Committed myself again with Christian brothers  
to unreserved docility and devotion before my Master.

Until this week, I had not heard of Maltie Babcock but to many people in the United States and perhaps across the world his faith is known and so too his poems and hymns. In his daily life, he was conscious of Jesus, of the Presence, of the Mystery. In all he sought to do, even in the midst of personal hardships, he pointed to Christ.

Some years ago, the Dalai Lama was asked in interview, ‘Do you ever get angry?’ As if by way of encouragement, the interviewer added, ‘Jesus got angry. Do you get angry?’ The foremost spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhists replied pointedly, ‘Don’t compare me with Jesus. He is a great master, a great master’. In the opening chapters of the Gospel of John, the Baptist said of Jesus, ‘I am not worthy to unfasten the strap of his sandal’. The following day, John looked towards Jesus in the distance and said, ‘There is the Lamb of God!’

In his book, *A Simple Life*, the former Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, John Miller, tells the story of the late Roland Walls. Father Roland led the *Community of the Transfiguration* in Roslyn. I never met Roland Walls but the stories I have heard endear him to me. John Miller opens his first chapter with these words:

In his very old age, Father Roland Walls was walking up through the garden of the Community’s house, steadied by the arm of a friend. He paused for a rest. His eye caught sight of a tiny blue flower growing beside the path. ‘Look at

that!’ he said in a tone of awe. ‘Isn’t it beautiful? Just sitting there. Not drawing attention to itself. Just being itself.’

For Roland, each moment was a sacrament. He possessed the peace of mind and spirit to be still and see the Word of God shine through the tiny flower not drawing attention to itself. A crying need of our time, in the midst of life’s pressures, busyness and noise, is to find a way of incorporating simplicity and deep contentment into everyday life. Through the blessing of a tiny blue flower, not drawing attention to itself, just being itself, for Roland, was a means of discovering the Divine. With imaginative faith, Roland Walls saw the Word of God shine through a flower’s colour and fragility: perhaps it was no less a sacrament than Bread and Wine set on a holy table.

Maltie Babcock, the Dalai Lama, and John the Baptist drew attention to Jesus, to God in Jesus, through their varied witness. Fr Roland Walls saw the Christ, the Word of God, through the beauty of a flower. I wonder if we can extend our vision to see the Living Christ beyond the walls of our tradition.

On Wednesday of last week, I was honoured to take part in a memorial event marking the life of the late Lord Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi. One of the things that Rabbi Sacks had said was, ‘If I cannot see God in those who are different from me, then I have made God in my image’. In our society, paradoxically multi-faith and secular, Sacks said that we must strive for the common

good. In our pursuit of the common good, can we see the face of Jesus?

The Jewish tradition is marked by its emphasis on ethics rather than philosophical doctrine. In one of his reflections on Passover, Sacks told the story of a friend in New York. He said:

I think of [a] friend, a woman in New York, who was watching a documentary about the plight of orphans in Rwanda ten years after the massacre. She thought immediately, I'm Jewish, I'm supposed to help, and so she began contacting people who'd had experience helping child survivors of the Holocaust, and within a few years they'd constructed the Agahozo Shalom youth village in Rwanda, housing 750 young people, teaching them advanced agricultural and computer skills, and training them to become leaders who can teach those skills to others.

Sacks concluded that an important lesson of the Passover, the meal Jesus shared in from His youth, is that the world doesn't have to be the way it is. 'Slaves can go free.'

Can we see Jesus, the Spirit of Jesus, in face of others, those who are different from us? Drawing on examples of brothers and sisters in the Torah, the Hebrew Bible, and in the Gospels, Rabbi Sacks said:

Now it is time for Jews, Christians and Muslims to say what they failed to say in the past: we are all children of Abraham....we are precious in the sight of God. We are blessed. And to be blessed, no one has to be cursed. God's love does not work that way.

Humour plays a central part in Jewish storytelling. In a reflection on human violence, Sacks said that it often stems from our competition

for scarce resources. He told the story of “two friends walking in the jungle when they hear the roar of a lion. The first starts thinking of places they can hide. The second puts on his running shoes. The first says, ‘What are you thinking of? You can’t possibly run faster than a lion.’ The second replies, ‘I don’t need to run faster than a lion. I just need to run faster than you!’” Competition fires the human imagination, our creativity and ingenuity, but it can make us tribal, aggressive and destructive towards those who are different from us.

In the Abrahamic tradition, the tradition of Jews, Christians and Muslims, justice applies equally to all nations, all people, to every man, woman and child; to the widow, the orphan, the blind and the lame. Sacks said that through his call for justice, Abraham honoured his neighbour who was different from him. Do we see and hear the Spirit of Jesus in the pages of Scripture, in the witness of Maltie Babcock and millions like him, in the simplicity of Fr Walls and in the wisdom of a Chief Rabbi?

Amen.