

Sermon

Sunday 10 May 2020

Lesson

Exodus 3: 1 – 6, 13 - 15

St John 14: 1 - 3, 27

Jesus said, ‘In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you’. Read very frequently at funeral services, these haunting words of Jesus about heaven, His Father’s house, are offered as a metaphor of comfort; a vivid image of expansiveness, warmth and welcome. Do you take to heart this sensitive, pastoral care of Jesus? Facing His disciples who were anxious about His impending death, Jesus spoke soothing, peaceful words of reassurance: ‘I go to prepare a place for you....I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where *I am*, there you may be also’.

This is tender and potentially dangerous ground for the preacher.

What can we say of life beyond this life, the resurrection, the world to come and heaven? It is potentially dangerous because it concerns not only ourselves but our loved ones departed. What do you believe and is life beyond this life a central tenet of *your* faith? If so, what do you imagine resurrected life to be like? Looking into their searching

eyes, Jesus said, 'Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid'.

Jesus, son of Mary, the rabbi from Nazareth, stood squarely within the Jewish tradition. Born in the land of Judah, Jesus lived in a dynamic and changing faith tradition, a tradition which had evolved across the centuries and which continued to evolve after His death. Let me take a moment to sketch briefly that history.

There is no simple, straightforward answer to what the Jewish people believed about what happens after death. In the Jewish Bible, the *Tanakh*, it was said that Jews *and* Gentiles went to the netherworld called *She'ol*, a dark and deep place filled with shadowy figures; *She'ol* was humanity's final destination. This bleak and uninspiring belief was shared with the Babylonians and Greeks.

It was during the exile (587 BC - 538 BC) and in the years that followed that the Jewish tradition began to hear new insights in Scripture.

With fresh ears and open minds, they heard new meanings in the Book of Samuel: ‘The Lord killeth, and maketh alive: he bringeth down to the grave, and bringeth up’. In Ezekiel’s most famous vision of the dry bones, they imagined a new meaning and possibility. In part, the search for something more than *She’ol* was driven by the slaughter of Jewish heroes during the Maccabean Revolt of 167 – 160BCE. The Revolt was a Jewish rebellion against the Hellenistic empire. Many came to believe that the Jewish martyrs did not die in vain; rather, after a temporary death, they entered a future of just rewards.

In the time of Jesus, the Sadducees (the priestly cast), did not believe in an afterlife but the Pharisees did. Like Jesus, the Pharisees believed in some form of resurrection. When the Temple was destroyed in 70CE, the Sadducees disappeared along with it, leaving only those in the Jewish family who believed in some form of afterlife. It is during this period that concepts of hell also emerge. As the centuries passed, Jewish thought came under the influence of Plato and Aristotle. Following Plato, the soul of a human being was

an emanation of God released from the body at death. By the twelfth century, the Jewish philosopher Maimonides understood the soul to be part of the intelligence of God. After death, the righteous would partake in the divine intelligence. *Only a philosopher would come up with that sort of possibility!*

In the Middle Ages, Judaism entertained the possibility of **reincarnation**. In the twenty-first century Jews of faith continue to believe a whole range of possibilities about life beyond death except, perhaps, in the existence of *She'ol*, the only belief mentioned in the Jewish Bible. What do *we* believe? In our scientific age, when the pattern of things, from the smallest mother cell to the largest star, is one of death and new life, death and rebirth, what do we believe?

In the Christian tradition, would you be surprised to learn that different thinkers have stressed different thoughts over the course of two millennia? The first century Church Father, Clement of Rome, did not mention entry into Heaven but belief in a general resurrection of the dead at the Second Coming of Christ. The second century

Church Father Irenaeus did not believe that every ‘saved’ Christian would be received into heaven. In the Eastern Church, the poetic phrase of Jesus, ‘many mansions’, is said to suggest heaven having different levels. It was not until the sixth century that, against a significant minority of Christians, Pope Gregory the Great declared belief in reincarnation to be a heresy. **According to recent polling in the US, American Christians, Catholics and Protestants, to different degrees believe in heaven, hell, purgatory and reincarnation!**

It should perhaps be no surprise that we cannot imagine the reality of ‘heaven’; that heaven is beyond our capacity to conceptualise. Religion is steeped in metaphor! In my view, it is incredibly easy to slip, almost unconsciously, into literalism. In *The Lord’s Prayer*, ‘Our Father in heaven’, ‘heaven’ is no less a metaphor than ‘Father’. ‘Heaven’ means no more than that God is more than and ultimately beyond this earth, this physical universe; a different reality; an eternal essence or Life Force. In the Gospel of Matthew, the evangelist wrote repeatedly of ‘the kingdom of heaven’. Properly translated, it

is *the kingdom of the heavens*. The phrase is a metaphor for God, for the Divine Absolute, the Most Real.

In the Book of Exodus, we hear that the name of God is *Yahweh*. It is often translated as 'I am' or 'I will be'. In the rabbinic tradition, it is said that 'I am' is an abbreviation for 'I am with you'. God said to Moses, 'This is my name for ever'. That phrase 'for ever' can also be translated as 'concealed'. In the rabbinic tradition, we may say that the God who is with us, with us always - I am with you - is the God who is hidden, concealed. God is the paradox, the mystery, of absence and Presence.

Let us take ourselves back to Jesus speaking to His anxious and fearful disciples. Gently, He told them. 'In my Father's house are many mansions.....I will come again....where *I am*, there you may be also.' If we listen with the heart, that 'I am' takes us back to Moses, the burning bush, and God's silent voice - I am with you - with you always. The God who is hidden is the God who is with us always. *For me*, all the images of heaven and every suggestion or hint that it is

a physical reality fail and fall. What does not fail or fall is listening to the voice of God from the bush not consumed, and from the lips of Jesus. At its best, religion is about relationship with the Divine, trust in the voice we hear in Scripture, trust in the soul's deepest intuition, in the tone and love of the Eternal: *where I am, there you may be also*. The Divine is to be encountered in this life.

The Trappist monk Thomas Merton said:

As soon as [we are] fully disposed to be alone with God, [we are] alone with God no matter where [we] may be – in the country, the monastery, the woods or the city. The lightning flashes from east to west, illuminating the whole horizon and striking where it pleases and at the same instant the infinite liberty of God flashes in the depths of [our] soul and [we are] illumined. At that moment [we see] that though [we seem] to be in the middle of [our] journey, [we have] already arrived at the end. For the life of grace on earth is the beginning of the life of glory. Although [we are travellers] in time, [we have] opened [our] eyes, for a moment, in eternity.

The God who is concealed, hidden, is with us always. God holds us eternally. God is our truest friend; we are to trust in that truth.

Amen.