

Sermon

Sunday 17 May, 2020

Lesson

St John 14: 15 – 21

Today is the sixth and final Sunday in the season of Easter. The pandemic of Covid-19 has replaced the pandemic of busyness and, for good or ill, we have been confined in lockdown for many weeks. It is difficult to speak of the lockdown without being mindful of those for whom this unsettling period has brought anxiety, fear,



hopelessness, abuse and suffering.

Let us hope that the lockdown is eased soon and safely. I know from conversations that the enforced confinement has yielded some benefits. Forced to slow down, many

of us have appreciated the fecundity of Spring, the joyfulness of birdsong, and the blessed opportunity to be still and quiet for extended periods. The return to church may be a very long road, some months away, so it is important to keep ourselves spiritually nourished in a disciplined way. To an extent that, perhaps, we have never had to do before, we must assume greater personal responsibility for feeding our faith. Virtual worship has its place – the BBC has done remarkably well – but through patience there is no substitute for personal prayer and practice.

For a moment, in the mind's eye take yourself back to Midton Road, to our rich red sandstone church, dedicated in 1902 and, as you enter



this sacred space, sit for a while and let the peace, the shalom, of its beauty soak into your soul. The windows, including the Resurrection Window and that of St Columba, testify to our past and, as icons, gently draw us to the Divine, to the imageless Infinite. In Lochside, members truly are enriched by the simplicity and holiness of the sanctuary on Lochside

Road. At St Columba, we would have opened our services of public worship with the great Easter anthem, *Thine be the glory*.

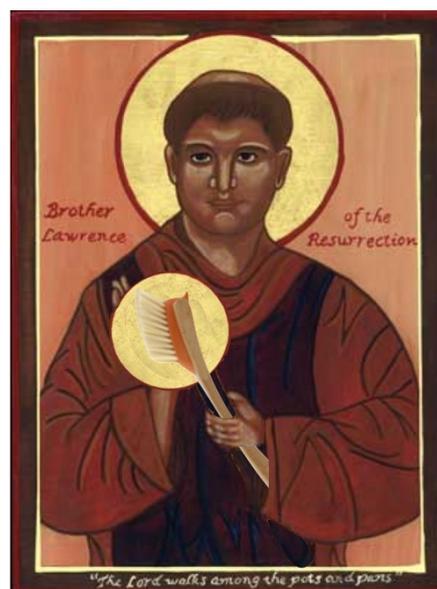
Often thought to be an ancient hymn, in part because of the tune, *À toi la gloire* was actually written in 1884 by the Swiss pastor Edmond Budry. Budry wrote the hymn to fit the music of George Frederick Handel: *Maccabeus*. Pastor for thirty-five years of Vevey, near Montreux on Lake Geneva, Budry's hymn was translated into English and the first British hymn book to include it was *The Methodist Hymn Book* (1933). The hymn draws heavily on the Gospel narratives and also the words of St Paul, 'But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Corinthians 15):

Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son,
 endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won;
 angels in bright raiment rolled the stone away,
 kept the folded grave-clothes, where thy body lay.

*Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son,
 endless is the victory thou o'er death hast won.*

In the spiritual Gospel, the Gospel of St John, Jesus spoke to His disciples of the Spirit. In the fading light and quietness of the Upper Room, having washed their feet and returned to the table, Jesus said to His friends that ‘the world cannot accept [the Spirit], because the world neither sees nor knows him; but you know him because he dwells with you and will be in you.’ If there is a blessing at all of this current lockdown, I hope for you it is an opportunity to learn each day that we live in the Spirit, that the Spirit lives in us – deep within you and me - and that we are held and embraced by the Holy One.

Born in France in the seventeenth century, Brother Lawrence was a ‘Discalced Carmelite’ monk. Only in the most severe climates did the brothers wear socks and sandals. Neither an abbot nor a distinguished scholar, Brother Lawrence worked in the kitchen of the monastery. In his spiritual writings, he repeatedly returned to the *practice of the presence of God*. ‘Abiding’ is a practice of faith. Born Nicolas Herman to peasant



parents, his conversion or turning to Christianity came when he was eighteen years old. On a winter's day, while looking at a tree stripped of its leaves, and reflecting for a time that leaves would appear again, and then flowers and fruits, Lawrence said that he received 'a lofty view of the providence and the power of God' which was never effaced from his soul. It was in the kitchen of the monastery that each day he trained himself to become aware of the presence of God.

The routine of formal prayers each day did not help him inwardly nor did he think much of Paradise, Hell, death or his sins. As he immersed himself in his awareness of the Divine, the Mystery, he became increasingly filled with love. Lawrence encouraged others in their self-surrender to God. In his spiritual advice to others, he wrote:

The most holy practice, the nearest to daily life, and the most essential for the spiritual life, is the practice of the presence of God, that is to find joy in his divine company and to make it a habit of life, speaking humbly and conversing lovingly with him at all times, every moment, without rule or restriction, above all at times of temptation, distress, dryness, and revulsion, and even of faithlessness and sin.

The spiritual insight and treasure of Brother Lawrence is that, wherever we are, we are to open ourselves, our lives, in the present

moment into the presence of Eternity. Walking, cycling, gardening, sitting, reading, listening, praying, in street, park and beach and in our own 'upper room', we are to pause, however fleetingly, to give thanks, observe, care and be silent, and silent with Jesus.

This same spiritual emphasis on the central importance of presence, awareness, is found also in other world faiths, including Islam. In his poem, *As the sky does in water*, the Islamic mystic Rumi (1207 – 1273) speaks of God, the presence, the absolute, as elusive. He writes:

For the grace of the presence, be grateful.
Touch the cloth of the robe,
but do not pull it toward you,
or like an arrow it will leave the bow.

Images. Presence plays with form,
fleeing and hiding as the sky does in water,
now one place, now nowhere.

Imagination cannot contain the absolute.
These poems are elusive
because the presence is.

I love the rose that is not a rose,
but the second I try to speak it, any name
for God becomes *so-and-so*, and vanishes.

What you thought to draw lifts off the paper,
as what you love slips from your heart.

Living in her small room, an anchorhold, Julian of Norwich (1343 – 1413) spoke of God as our friend, mother, father - as closer to us than the clothing we wear. She spoke of Mother Jesus and encouraged



others to see God in everything, in all that is made: everything is in God and God is in everything.

Jesus said to His disciples that the Spirit dwells in you and will be in you. In practising the Presence, we return to this inner sanctuary, wider awareness, each day.

The word ‘anchor’ brings me to the great hymn of The Boys’ Brigade. Perhaps I would have had this hymn today:

Will your anchor hold in the storms of life,
when the clouds unfold their wings of strife?
When the strong tides lift, and the cables strain,
will your anchor drift, or firm remain?

*We have an anchor that keeps the soul
steadfast and sure while the billows roll;
fastened to the Rock which cannot move,
grounded firm and deep in the Saviour’s love.*

Amen.