

Sermon

Sunday 3 May, 2020

Lessons

Psalm 23

St John 10: 1 – 10

The spiritual writer and former vicar of the Holy Island of Lindisfarne, David Adam encourages us to *practise the Presence*. In one of his meditations, Adam quotes some verses from the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning:

.....Earth's crammed with heaven,
 And every common bush afire with God:
 But only he who sees, takes off his shoes;
 The rest sit around it, and pluck the blackberries,
 And daub their natural faces, unaware.....

Adam encourages us to *practise the Presence* wherever we are. He says:

The God whom you seek is with you and seeking you in love. Remind yourself, 'I am loved by God'. The very place where you are at this moment is holy ground, for the Lord is with you. Speak to God and affirm [God's] presence. You may like to say, 'God You are here; you are here with me.' Say it with meaning. You may like to shorten the phrase and simply say 'God You are'. You can reduce the words once more and simply say, with love and adoration, 'God'.

We can repeat this affirmation as often as we find it helpful. In everyday life, in the midst of the virus and increasing strain of



lockdown, we are bombarded with news and images to the extent that our minds cannot rest. Insofar as we can, Adam encourages us to make space for God. It could be a

walk in the park or a moment alone at home but a moment of mental emptiness, mindful of the Presence, will be therapeutic. Barrett Browning said, ‘Every common bush afire with God, but only he who sees, takes off his shoes.’

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus spoke of the shepherd. Jesus said, ‘The sheep follow [the shepherd] because they know his voice.’ The images of shepherd and sheep appear in the Book of Psalms and in Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. In Psalm 100, the psalmist wrote, ‘We are his folk, he doth us feed, and for his sheep he doth us take.’ In Psalm 23, we read, ‘The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.’ These are pastoral texts written to be *pondered in the heart*.

Many Gospel stories draw their inspiration from stories in the Old Testament. In the Book of Ezekiel, at chapter 34, we read of God as the true Shepherd. The chapter begins with the prophet condemning the leaders of Israel for failing to be good shepherds, for failing to feed and care for their people. Listen to God’s response. God said,

‘I will rescue my sheep.....I will search for my sheep and will seek them out.....I will feed them with good pasture.....I will seek the lost and bring back the strayed.....I will judge between the sheep and the goats....You are my sheep.’ I wonder if you heard in these words from the ancient text of Ezekiel the origin of the Parable of the Lost Sheep and the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats? Jesus used the texts of Ezekiel for His own imaginative storytelling. Pastorally, the prophet Ezekiel and later Jesus want us to understand that God is present, hears and feels our suffering, is at one with us and desires nothing more than for us to stop, turn towards God and hear God’s voice; hear God’s silence in our hearts.

The most familiar psalm in Scotland is Psalm 23. The great Baptist preacher of the Victorian era, Charles Spurgeon, said that the most important word in the entire psalm is ‘my’: ‘The LORD is *my* Shepherd.’ ‘If [the LORD] is a Shepherd to no one else, he is a



Shepherd to me.’ In Hebrew, the rhythm of the opening verse is more staccato than we have in English: it reads, ‘The LORD – *my* Shepherd! For the psalmist, it is a moment of joyous revelation: the psalmist has discovered as if for the very first time the LORD is his Shepherd: *my* Shepherd!

It was on reading the Psalms that the greatest of the Early Church Fathers, St Augustine, said that his heart burned within him.

Scripture is designed to be read and carried around within us, in the consciousness.

The writer, the late Jim Cotter, offered his own translation of Psalm 23; what he called a divine song. Drawing on the mystical insights of John's Gospel, Cotter introduced a refrain into the psalm: 'Dwell in me that I may dwell in You.' Listen with the heart. Cotter wrote:

*Dear God, you sustain and feed me:
like a shepherd you guide me.
You lead me to an oasis of green,
to lie down by restful waters.
Quenching my thirst, you restore my life:
renewed and refreshed, I follow you,
a journey on the narrowest of paths.*

*Even when cliffs loom out of the mist,
my step is steady because of my trust.
Even when I go through the deepest valley,
with the shadow of darkness and death,
I shall fear no evil or harm
For you are with me to give me strength,
your crook, your staff, at my side.
Dwell in me that I may dwell in you.*

*Even in the midst of my troubles,
with the murmurs of those who disturb me,
I know I can feast in your presence.
You spread a banquet before me,
you anoint my head with oil,
you stoop to wash my feet,
you fill my cup to the brim.
Dwell in me that I may dwell in you.*

*Your loving kindness and mercy
will meet me every day of my life.
By your Spirit you dwell within me,
and in the whole world around me,
and I shall abide in your house,
content in your presence for ever.
Dwell in me that I may dwell in you.*

At times in life we are faced with troubles we did not think would come our way. We are faced with brokenness, pain, fear or helplessness. It is in such times that a lifetime of walking with Christ, listening for His voice, resting in His company, sitting with Jesus, helps sustain us in our darkest moments. *Practising the Presence*, we will know what it means to have God the true Shepherd walk with us. At times, in our darkest moments, like Jesus, we may not be able to think straight, we may doubt the existence of God or feel God to be utterly absent, but God is in the darkness.

The Victorian minister George Matheson repeatedly drew the attention of his congregation to the many times that Jesus and the great figures of the Bible stepped aside from their everyday activity in order to be alone with God. Matheson, wrote:



Meet me alone, O Lord, meet me alone! Let me feel for one moment the awful dignity of my own soul....Bring me out from the hiding place of the fig leaves! Let me hear Your voice in the Garden speaking to me – to me alone!

Is it not written, ‘When they were alone, He expounded all things to His disciples’?

Meet me on my own threshold. Meet me when the sun has gone down, when the crowd has melted, when the pulse of the city beats low. Meet me in the stillness of my own heart, in the quiet of my own room, in the silence of my own reflective hour. Reveal to me my greatness! Flash your light upon the treasures hid in my field! Show me the diamond in my dust! Bring me the pearl from my sea! When you have magnified my soul, I shall learn my need of You!

Amen.

Note from Session Clerk

I know that, for a host of reasons, you will be missing your Church. Life is just not the same when you are unable to attend Sunday services and Church related events. None of us knows for how long this period of lockdown will last. For those of you concerned about the position of our employees I am pleased to tell you that none of them will lose their jobs or lose out financially as a result of the lockdown.

For those of you who may be concerned that you are not able to fund the Church’s ongoing financial commitments by reason of the fact that you are unable to come to Church, some options that you might want to consider have been detailed in a separate item on the website in the Current Information section under the heading ‘Options for Offerings’. I suspect that many of you

will be putting money aside so that when we do eventually get back to a degree of normality you will be able to make good that which you would have paid in normal circumstances.

Please do not be concerned about the financial wellbeing of the Church during this difficult period in all of our lives. It is there for you now and it will be there for you in better times.

Bob Bartholomew