

Sermon

Sunday 13 June 2021

Lesson

St Mark 4: 26 – 34

In 1986 the Northern Irish writer Brian Keenan was kidnapped in Beirut. Keenan spent four and a half years – 1574 days – in a cell at the hands of Islamic Jihad. Initially isolated for two months, he was moved to share a cell with journalist, John McCarthy. Keenan described his incarceration as a ‘screaming slide into the bowels of ultimate despair’. Malnourished and physically weak, he was released in August 1990 having lost four stone in weight. Over their time in captivity, Keenan and McCarthy found great solace in reading the Psalms.

Keenan said that he retreated into his mind. He spoke of aloneness, which is not loneliness for we need other people. Keenan said that:

There is a place inside each of us that we can go alone.
It can be deeply enriching...but also disturbing because
it forces you to look at yourself.

For Keenan, being at peace in his aloneness led to his inner liberation.

Not a religious man, Keenan visits churches but finds religion too narrow, controlling and limiting. He says that it is ‘only in desolate places that he finds “whatever is luminous; whatever is holy, whatever this ‘other’ thing is.” Drawing from personal experience,

Keenan writes:

In desolate, empty spaces you can find an invisible portal which you can pass into. In a way this allows you to pass into yourself and look into yourself. That to me is a religious experience.

Living through the hell of being a hostage, questions about God were very real to him. He said:

If there is a God out there, it better be real and it better be meaningful. It better do things which engage me in a way which I can feel and sense, otherwise it's a just a sham. But here's the paradox. I'm not religious but when I was locked up I prayed. I prayed daily and said to God that if he got me out of there, I would do all sorts of things. But you can't make deals with God.

We do not need to have been a hostage held by terrorists to have bargained with God in our prayers. If not a religious man, surely, he is a spiritual man and in his aloneness he found the luminous, the

holy, the Divine. The change for Keenan was within. Is there something of Keenan's experience we can see in the life of Jesus that is instructive for us?

The Gospel of Mark is the *evangelion* or good news of Jesus. The Gospel falls into two halves. In the first half, Jesus performs many miracles; it is action-packed. Everywhere He goes, He heals people. By contrast, in the second half, there are only two miracles, the last of which is the healing of blind Bartimaeus. It is a story about blindness, sight and spiritual seeing. Having healed people – a man with an unclean spirit or a person suffering from leprosy – Jesus almost always instructs them not to tell anyone. What does this secrecy mean?

The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, says that Jesus may have been a faith healer like others of those days but, crucially, Jesus did not believe that those healings, those 'miracles', were the point. In the Gospel of Mark, it is not in the miracles that we find God; they are – seemingly – a distraction. The first disciples

were not called through miraculous visions or a voice from heaven; no miracle stopped the imprisoned prophet, John the Baptist, from being beheaded. ‘Magical’ miracles, whatever they were, are not the point. Jesus did not want people to know about them.

There is only one place in the Gospel of Mark where God is explicitly revealed, where Jesus spoke the name of God. Arrested and tortured, it is when Jesus stands alone before the High Priest that, in answer to questions, He utters the sacred name of the Holy, the name given by God to Moses at the burning bush: ‘I AM’. There is no ‘magical’ miracle that releases Jesus from His imprisonment and, yet it is here in this the darkest place that God is present. This is the moment of revelation. Do we see something of the Keenan story here?

If the ‘miracles’ are not the *evangelion*, not the good news, what may we say of the parables? The parables of Jesus are simple and exquisitely beautiful, but do we ponder them? They are so familiar to us that we have grown almost deaf to them. Parables are comparisons: ‘The Kingdom of God is like this...’. At the lakeside,

on the slopes of a hill, in synagogues and in the precincts of the temple, Jesus taught the crowds and His disciples through the graceful poetry of parables. In the Gospels, some thirty or so parables are used imaginatively to describe the nature of God. What do you hear in the Parable of the Growing Seed or the Parable of the Mustard Seed?

Having scattered seed on the ground, a man goes to bed at night and in the morning the seed has sprouted and grown: he does not know how. Overnight, the ground produces a crop: the blade, the ear and finally the full grain. Similarly, the mustard seed grows from the smallest seed into a plant larger than any other. What strikes me about these ancient endearing riddles is the sense of mystery: the ‘unknownness’ of how a seed grows, or how from such a small beginning a seed evolves and rapidly changes into a robust plant in which birds may build a nest.

Scientist today may describe the biological mechanism of seeds growing into plants and crops but that is to miss the point altogether.

In the parable, the ‘power’ within the seed is unseen; elusive, creative and, ultimately, it gives life to the crop, plant and birds. The energy or essence within the seed is its true life. So it is with the Kingdom of God: it is a power, an energy or essence within us. It is the spiritual within, the life lived with God within us, that is the source of our strength and fulfilment. Miracles of magic are a distraction. The revelation of Jesus is that God is discovered within us, even in our darkest times.

I do understand the writer Brian Keenan’s hesitation about religion in general. Religions do have a tendency to put God in a box: we feel safer if God is in a box over there. Keenan surely wanted a miracle but the sanctuary he found was in the mind. We are to look for God in the circumstances of our lives. Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, a Russian archbishop of last century said, ‘If I can’t find God here, I shall not find God anywhere’. Think of Jesus before the High Priest or Keenan being held and questioned by terrorists. The Kingdom of God is like this.

Amen.