

Sermon

Sunday 15 October, 2017

Lessons

Exodus 32: 1 – 14 Philippians 4: 1 – 9
St Matthew 22: 1 – 14

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Transcendent God, Mysterious Being, Sacred Silence at the centre of the Cosmos, at home in the human soul, dwelling in darkness, bless us with Your Wisdom, Your Spirit that fills all things. Amen.

This past week you may have watched the story on the BBC of the former American marine who, following the terrorist attacks in Paris in 2015, opened fire on a mosque next to his home in Connecticut. The gunman, we might say the terrorist, fired dozens of shots in order to scare would-be extremists. Under the influence of alcohol, the former US Marine, Ted Hakey, used a semi-automatic weapon to fire 20 rounds into the mosque. The shots were fired at night and, fortunately, no one was inside. On the following morning – a Sunday - when worshippers arrived for prayer they found bullet holes around the sanctuary, in the main prayer area. The Secretary for Outreach, Miyan Zahir, said that the initial response of members was, ‘What did we do wrong?’ The sign outside the mosque reads, ‘Love for All. Hatred for None.’ Miyan Zahir asks, ‘How did that miss anyone’s sight?’

After the incident, after the initial reaction, the community leaders said that they wanted to meet Ted. When finally the meeting took place, the big hulky former Marine said he was filled with guilt and tears flowed from his eyes. In that meeting, both sides were surprised by the sincerity of the other. The community invited Ted to a pre-arranged interfaith gathering, the purpose of which was to counter extremism. Ted attended and apologised. In his speech to the community, Ted said that, 'If I had spent just five minutes with you, it would have made all the difference in the world, and I did not do that'. Afterwards, he was hugged and everyone wanted to shake his hand; he was overwhelmed. After serving his prison sentence, Ted regularly attends the mosque. There is a scene in the BBC film in which he listens to a senior member of the community teach that the purpose of Islam to connect humanity to God and for each member of the community to be useful to other people. Miyan Zahir said that Ted is spreading real message: 'Everything is not what it seems.'

Last Friday at Edinburgh Airport, the Co-Convenor of Edinburgh Inter-Faith Association, Nasim Asad, was subject to a torrent of religious and racial abuse. Two men, whom she'd never seen before,

approached her and began to verbally abuse her. Nasim said, 'They used a lot of foul language; racist, Islamophobic language.' She stood frozen, stunned, violated. She asked herself, 'Why am I hearing this? What did I do wrong?' Nasim said that it made her feel very, very small. She reported the incident to airport staff. By use of CCTV, the police were able to apprehend the men. Nasim said that the police were sensitive and took the complaint seriously. She said for some people, the incident may not seem much but that, for her, 'It was a very, very big thing'. She said, 'Nobody should be a victim of hate crime. On the BBC this week, Nasim said, 'Different colour, race, faith, gender, wheelchair user, LGBT community: we're all the same.'

A couple of weeks ago I attended a Peace Service to mark International Peace Day. During that Service, representatives led pilgrims from across different faiths in chant, meditation and prayer. Let us take a moment to listen deeply to the heart of the Holy that is in each pathway. The Buddhist offered a traditional prayer:

May all beings be happy and create the causes of happiness.
May they be free from suffering and from creating the causes of suffering.
May they find that noble happiness that can never be tainted by suffering.
May they attain universal, impartial compassion,
beyond worldly bias towards friend or foe.

Imam Hassan Rabbani from Annandale Mosque offered a prayer from Islam:

O God, unite our hearts and set aright our mutual affairs;
guide us in the path of peace.
Liberate us from darkness by Your Light.
Save us from [extremes] whether open or hidden.
Bless us in our ears, eyes, hearts, spouse and children.
Turn to us: truly You are Oft-Returning, Most Merciful.
Make us grateful for Your bounty and full of praise for it.....

From the Jewish tradition, a prayer:

It is not enough to pray for peace.
We have to work for it:
to challenge those who foster conflict, and refute their
propaganda;
to ascertain and make known the truth,
both when it confirms and when it runs counter to
conventional views;
to denounce injustice.....
to defend human rights, not only our own; and
to build bridges of respect and understanding, trust and
friendship,
across chasms that divide humanity.

So many of the speakers spoke of the peace and beauty that can be found in the human heart, in the soul. In his Letter to the Philippians, the apostle wrote of the peace of God: 'The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.' In our tradition, at its very best, it is about that sacred peace, heartfelt, life-changing. The Co-Convenor of Edinburgh InterFaith, Nasim Asad, said, 'Different colour, race, faith, gender, wheelchair user, LGBT community: we're all the same.' At

the Peace Service, all speakers spoke deeply of the peace at the heart of their faith. It is a marked contrast to the violence of Ted Hakey and the two men at Edinburgh airport. St Paul encouraged the church community in Philippi:

Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.....and the God of peace will be with you.

‘The God of peace will be with you’. With that in mind, what did you make of the Parable of the Wedding Banquet? ‘The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son.’ Those who were invited refused to turn up, while the slaves who had gone out to invite them were maltreated and killed. Later, one guest who did turn up, a guest not wearing a wedding robe, was bound hand and foot by order of the king, and thrown into the outer darkness, where it is said there would be weeping and gnashing of teeth. What are we to make of this hard, seemingly brutal parable?

The parables of seed and soil, pearls, yeast and hidden treasure have been replaced by a story with a more sinister tone. Jesus, it seems, the rabbi who had said that the meek would inherit the Earth, who

had taught His disciples to forgive not seven times but seventy times seven, now recounts parables of outer darkness, and the weeping and gnashing of teeth. In this parable, who are the slaves who have been maltreated and killed? 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God', yet it seems in this parable of Jesus the king is unforgiving, brutal, inhumane, a monster. What do we make of this parable? This is not the first parable of its type. There is an earlier one, in the previous chapter: the Parable of the Wicked Tenants. What can we say about the God of peace, or Jesus, the rabbi of peace?

The slaves who are killed are the prophets. The one without a wedding robe are the Jewish leaders who have rejected Jesus. The reference to binding and outer darkness is drawn from earlier Jewish literature and the well-known dictum, 'Many are called, but few are chosen', similarly has many parallels in Jewish sources. It is not a good parable because it portrays a brutal deity. Over the course of my ministry I have heard many people say that they like the God of the New Testament, of the Gospels, but not the fierce God of the Old Testament. The truth is that the portrayals of God that we dislike in the Old Testament perhaps have a parallel here in the New

Testament. I do not believe that the Parable of the Wedding Banquet in Matthew 22 is a parable of Jesus. Jesus' parables were not about Himself. They were always about God: the Parable of the Forgiving Father, the Gracious Landowner, the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and so on and so on. The Parable of the Wedding Banquet, like the Parable of the Wicked Tenants, is truly a product of the early Christian community. These were written some fifty years or so after the death of Jesus, after the destruction of the temple, at a time when the Jewish community was having to redefine itself without the rituals of the temple and, at the same time, as the embryonic Christian community, that is the Jewish community of Matthew, was seeking to define itself as a community of the Messiah.

This parable is, dare I use the word, propaganda: it is a fierce condemnation of the Jewish leaders and, by inference, the Jewish people who did not accept Jesus as Lord. As intelligent people of faith, we should not be afraid to wrestle with our own Scriptures, or at times, criticise them. It is easy for us to look at the Exodus story of the Golden Calf, to see the calf as an idol, but do we see that we are in danger of turning the Bible into an idol? The Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount, which is where Matthew began, is not to be found in the

Parable of the Wedding Banquet. There is a softer tone to this story in the Lukan version. There we explicitly find the Kingdom belonging to the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame: that is the Jesus we know. In an age of spiritual evolution, of inter-faith and co-pilgrims, are we prepared to say that Jewish leaders and Jews who do not accept Jesus as Messiah will be thrown into outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth?

People of no faith can be prejudiced, brutal and dehumanising in their attitudes and behaviour, but so too can people of faith. In the Matthew story today, we see a glimpse of that in the early Christian community, a community no doubt which felt itself to be persecuted.

As Paul said in Philippians:

Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just,
whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is
commendable,
if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of
praise, think about these things.....and the God of peace will be
with you.

Amen.