

Lessons Numbers 6: 22 – 27 Philippians 2: 5 – 11 St Luke 2: 15 – 21

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Still us, O God, that we may sense Your Spirit in this sacred space, be moved by Your Presence in our prayers, and be made whole by the Word we find in music and meditation. Amen.

In the tent of meeting, in that sacred space in the wilderness, that holy place set apart from common use and busyness, the LORD spoke to Moses. The people of Israel travelled for forty years in the deserts of the Middle East, from the heart of Egypt to Palestine. The wilderness was believed to be a place of spiritual encounter: the emptiness it afforded made it ripe for experience of the Eternal. It is worth noticing that, though the wilderness was vast and silent at night, nevertheless the pilgrim people, the Hebrews, built a tent of the LORD's Presence. In the *Book of Exodus*, we read:

Whenever the people of Israel set up camp, Moses would take the sacred Tent and put it up some distance outside the camp. It was called the Tent of the Lord's presence, and anyone who wanted to consult the Lord would go out to it. Whenever Moses went out there, the people would stand at the door of their tents and watch Moses until he entered it. After Moses had gone in, the pillar of cloud would come down and stay at the door of the Tent, and the Lord would speak to Moses from the cloud.

It was in moments of stillness, in that degree of quiet that is only possible in the deepest emptiness, that the LORD, YHWH, the God of Sinai, spoke to *Moshe*, to Moses. The 13th/14th century mystic, Meister Eckhart, said, 'Nothing in all creation is so like God as stillness.' It was from this setting of silence that the LORD told *Moshe* to put the LORD's name on the Israelites. Bearing the name of the Sacred would be a blessing for them.

I am reminded of the story told by the spiritual writer, John Philip Newell. In his book *The Rebirthing of God*, Philip tells the story of his late father who, towards the end of his life, descended into dementia. Not long before his father moved into a nursing home, Philip accompanied his father to a car showroom where he had arranged for a salesman to purchase his father's car. On the day prior to the appointment, Philip called the salesman and said, 'When you meet my father tomorrow, you will notice that he seems confused about all sorts of things. But please honour him by speaking to him, not me. This is his car. And I'll be there with him.' On the following day, after the transaction was completed, Philip said to the young salesman, 'Whenever I part from my father or whenever we finish a

telephone conversation, he gives me a blessing. And I think he would like to bless you now.’ Standing in the car showroom, Philip’s father took the salesman’s hand, looked straight into his eyes and, citing the ancient words of the Aaronic blessing, put the LORD’s name upon him:

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you,
and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you,
and give you peace.

To Philip’s surprise, the salesman had tears in his eyes. From the tent of the LORD’s Presence, from the lips of Moshe 4000 years ago, to the lips of a man succumbing to dementia, the LORD’s name has been placed on generations of people, including every child baptised in the Christian Church for centuries.

In his Letter to the Philippians, the apostle Paul wrote, ‘Let the same mind be in you as was in Christ Jesus.’ The apostle to the Gentiles said, ‘the same mind’. We are to still ourselves to such an extent that our thoughts are united, in union, with the thought, desire and will of the Divine. The sixteen century Carmelite friar, St John of the Cross, calls us to walk in loving awareness of God. While it is not for

everyone, St John said that what lies at the very heart of the New Testament is 'a doctrine of pure liberty'. For St John, the spiritual practice, the bedrock of every story and verse of Scripture, is to gain freedom from our passions and ego. Everything he wrote encourages us to renounce self, abandon self and, in faith, to rely on the mercy of God.

Of course we must love the world, love and care for family and friends, but St John calls for true activism, that is, work on the inner life. There is a story told of Sarapion the Sindonite who went on pilgrimage to Rome. He had heard of a recluse who lived there in a single room. As a traveller, he could not imagine such inactivity. When he met her, Sarapion asked, 'Why do you just sit here?' She replied, 'I'm not sitting. I'm on a journey.'

Moses was told to place the name of the LORD on the Israelites. In his Letter to the Philippians, St Paul bids us to have the mind of the Christ or, as St John of the Cross puts it, to be completely enwrapped in silence, where the passions and ego have fallen away. Detached, we find God in our emptiness; present to the Presence.

In our Gospel lesson, we heard the story of the naming of Jesus. The name Jesus in Hebrew is *Yeshua*, which means to rescue or deliver. As followers of Jesus, as people inspired by His life, example and the many faith narratives that encapsulate His Spirit and essence, we are to bear the name of Jesus. In baptism, that name is written indelibly on our forehead.

The British adventurer, Bear Grylls, the Chief Scout in the United Kingdom, has a remarkable record at the age of 42. Grylls has served in the Indian Army, hiked in the Himalayan mountains, suffered a freefall parachuting accident in Zambia, reached the summit of Mount Everest, circumnavigated the British Isles on jet skis, crossed the Atlantic Ocean on a rigid inflatable boat, together with others holds the world record for the highest open-air formal dinner party on a hot air balloon at 25,000ft, written a number of books and appeared on numerous television programmes. He is also actively involved in numerous charities, many of which support children.

Grylls says that his faith in God is the bedrock of his life. He was not brought up in the church but found his Christian faith at the age of 16. Grylls says:

When I was 16 my godfather, who was like a second parent to me, died. I was really upset and I said a very simple prayer up a tree – if you're still there, will you be beside me. And that was the start of something that grew and grew and it's become the backbone of my life.

As he has grown and matured, Grylls says that he is more and more convinced, more convinced than ever, that God is real, God is there, and God is love. He says:

It's a very personal relationship....To this day I start every day on my knees praying by my bed, and that's my grounding for the day.

Faith in God helps him face his fears, fears that include parachuting despite the earlier accident. Faith, he says, reduces his fears because he knows he is not alone.

My faith [he says] definitely plays a part in my love of the outdoors – I see miracles everywhere I look, in mountains and in the jungle. And I think I have less of a fear of death as well because I see it as going home.

With 2016 behind us, as we face the possibilities and opportunities of 2017, we do so as bearers of the name of Jesus. As a dementia sufferer or an adventurer, a Carmelite friar or a Presbyterian, what matters surely is that we share Jesus, share the peace of God, the blessing of the Sacred, in ways that we can through opportunities in our life. Bear Grylls said that God is real, God is there, God is love; I

see miracles everywhere. The mystics said the same thing, though they didn't jump out of aeroplanes! We are invited to walk in loving awareness of the Holy One – bearing the name of Jesus.

Amen.