

Sermon

Sunday 29 October, 2017

Lessons

Deuteronomy 34: 1 – 12
St Matthew 22: 34 – 46

1 Thessalonians 2: 1 – 8

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

God of death and life, of endings and new beginnings, of words and silence, bless us afresh with Your Spirit, reveal again Your love in our reflection and meditations. Amen.

‘Then Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there, in the land of Moab, at the LORD’s command.’ As those who live in the Christian tradition, we understand immediately the central importance of the death of Jesus. Slowly, carefully, the writers of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John weave their way towards the climax of the crucifixion, the final and ultimate expression of Jesus’ self-giving, the moment of mortal surrender to the Divine. In chapter after chapter, the Passion narrative is dramatic and forms the most detailed fragment of the story. But, in the Old Testament, the death of *Moshe*, Moses, is recounted in one solitary chapter. The greatest character in the entire episode of the Exodus, the liberator of the Hebrew slaves, the mystic who with the inner eye saw the bush burn, the prophet who alone entered the Tent of the LORD’s Presence, whose face radiated with Divine light, whose hands chiselled out the Ten Commandments,

has the story of his death told in no more than twelve verses. *Moshe*, Moses, died in the land of Moab, at the LORD's command.

We are fortunate to gain a glimpse into those final, tender, private moments. Moses had gone to the plains of Moab, to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah. Mount Nebo is the highest among the Pisgah summits; it is here on Mount Nebo in both the Book of Deuteronomy and the Qur'an that Moses died. Many times in his life, on mountain top in mysterious cloud and face to face, Moses encountered the awesome presence of the Sacred, the Holy One. At the age of 120, his sight unimpaired and his vigour unabated, God the LORD let *Moshe* see the land promised to Abraham. Having viewed the horizon, at the LORD's command Moses died.

As you might expect, the number 120 is not without significance. Within Judaism, it is a blessing to say, 'May you live to 120.' It is a reference to the Book of Genesis 6: 3, in which God says, 'My spirit shall not abide in mortals for ever, for they are flesh; their days shall be one hundred and twenty years.' 12, 120, 12,000 and 144,000 (which is 1200 times 1200) feature in Jewish, Christian and Islamic Scripture. Among other things, twelve symbolises completion,

fullness, wholeness. In our ancient myth today, Moses lived the fullest life possible for a human being. 120 years means completion and contentment.

Did you notice the phrase, 'His sight was unimpaired'? This is mythology, not blow by blow, moment by moment history. This is not a reference to his physical sight, to the organs of his visual system. The sight in Moses which was unimpaired was his mystical vision, his inner eye, his perception of the awesome Presence, his awareness of the Mystery who appeared to him in flame and cloud, in the soul's imagination.

In his final moments, Moses was fully alive to the God within him, to the Sacred within all things. We are told that Moses died at the LORD's command. In Hebrew, at the LORD's command means 'on the LORD's mouth.' In the Hebrew tradition, it is understood that the LORD took Moses' breath away with a kiss, a gesture of intimacy and love. We are told that God buried Moses which means nothing less than that Moses lives with God for ever, enfolded in God's eternal embrace. It is no surprise, therefore, that in the Gospels, in the mystical account of the Transfiguration, Moses together with Elijah

stands alongside Jesus. I suppose what I'm working towards is that, though Moses' death is recounted in a mere twelve verses, nevertheless the narrative portrays God as a lover, as One who holds on to Moses for all eternity. The Divine is our lover too. We are held now, in this moment, and for all eternity.

God is our lover and Moses encountered God in the cloud; the cloud is the glory of God. On Wednesday last I was privileged to attend an event in the Scottish Parliament to mark the 200th anniversary of the birth of Baha'u'llah, the founder of the Bahá'i Faith. The name Baha'u'llah means 'The Glory of God'; the word Bahá'i means 'beauty' or 'glory'. The Bahá'i Faith originated in Iran and dates from 1860. The man we know today as Baha'u'llah was a Persian nobleman who, persecuted and imprisoned, in the darkness of his cell, experienced or received a life-changing vision from God. This moment of transformation may be compared to the moment Moses stood before the Burning Bush; when the Buddha received enlightenment under the Bodhi tree; when the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove descended upon Jesus; or when the archangel Gabriel appeared to Muhammad. Central to the Bahá'i Faith is the belief that God in God's Self, in God's Essence, is unknowable but also that humanity is one and that the

purpose of the faith is to unite all races and peoples. Listen to this prayer in from the Bahá'í tradition:

O Thou kind Lord! Thou hast created all humanity from the same stock. Thou hast decreed that all shall belong to the same household. In Thy holy Presence they are all Thy servants....

Thou hast endowed each and all with talents and faculties, and all are submerged in the Ocean of Thy Mercy.....

O Thou kind Lord! Unite all. Let the religions agree and make the nations one, so that they may see each other as one family and the whole earth as one home. May they all live together in perfect harmony.

There is much in these prayers and in the faith of Baha'u'llah which finds a resonance in the faith and teachings of Jesus. The first Scottish convert to the Bahá'í Faith was a woman: Mrs Jane Elizabeth Whyte. What is significant about Mrs Whyte is that she was the wife of the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland. In 1913, Mrs Whyte invited the son and heir of Baha'u'llah, Abdul-Baha, to Edinburgh; he stayed at their official residence. In Edinburgh, Abdul-Baha met religious leaders, teachers, academics and many other people. He was guest of honour at a private performance of Handel's *Messiah* in St Giles' Cathedral. Prayers in the Bahá'í tradition recount God's love and address God as 'the Compassionate'. Does the Sacred which dwells in the hearts of the

followers of Baha'u'llah seem so very different from the One Jesus called Father? Did Jesus not speak to His disciples of God as love?

Just as the Father has loved me I have loved you; remain in my love. Just as I remain in the love of my Father, you will remain in my love.

In the Gospel of Matthew, we read that the Pharisees asked Jesus, 'Which of the commandments is the greatest?' He replied, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind....And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' The love of which Jesus spoke is not romantic love but a firm, dedicated, stubborn, committed love. We are to love the God of love with everything in us, and we are to love our neighbour similarly. What do these commandments mean in the 21st century? As we celebrate the achievements of the Reformation, as we mark a paradigm shift in our understanding of the Christian faith, in our understanding of God, what paradigm shift might we desire today, in our time? Surely, the step which needs to be taken by Christianity is for the churches to see themselves not as sole possessors of truth but as co-pilgrims journeying alongside people of other world faiths. The spiritual evolution of our time is to see followers of Sikhism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, the Bahá'í Faith and others as God-bearers, no less than you or me.

We cannot maintain claims of exclusivity when we see and hear the beauty in other faiths. In the literature of Islam, in the writings of Rumi, we read, "God said, 'a favourite and chosen servant of mine fell sick. I am he. Consider well: his infirmity is My infirmity; his sickness is My sickness.' That similar sentiment that God suffers in our suffering is found not only in Islam and Christianity but also in the Sikh mystic, Kushdeva Singh. Of God, Singh wrote:

People go to their temples
To greet Me;
How simple and ignorant are My children
Who think that I live in isolation.

Why don't they come and greet Me
In the procession of life, where I always live,
In the farms, the factories, and the market,
Where I encourage those
Who earn their bread by the sweat of their brow?

Why don't they come and greet Me
In the cottages of the poor
And find Me blessing the poor and the needy
And wiping the tears of widows and orphans?

.....

Why don't they come and greet Me
Among those who are trampled upon
By those proud of self and power.
And see Me beholding their suffering and
Pouring out compassion?

.....

I am sure
They can never miss Me
If they try to meet Me
In the sweat and struggle of life
And in the tears and tragedies of the poor.

The sentiment and insight of this poem could have been spoken by Jesus. When He taught 'Love your neighbour as yourself', Jesus cited words from His own Judaic tradition, words which find their equivalent in Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, Zoroastrianism and Islam. In other world faiths, we find the love of God, the compassion of God, the suffering of God and the desire for harmony and one humanity. Against a hierarchy which treasured self and power, Luther (allegedly) said, 'Here I stand; I can do no other.' Today, we need to stand against a church which fails to see the God of love, the incarnation, in other faiths, in followers of other faiths. It is no longer possible to maintain that there is only one Incarnation, only one manifestation of the Divine, Jesus the Christ. Other faiths believe God to be alive, present and active in human history, no less than that of Christianity. God is everywhere, in all things and in all people: that's the mystical vision for our time, that's our reformation.

Amen.