

Sermon

Sunday 6 May 2018

Lessons Acts 10: 44 – 48 1 John 5: 1 – 6 St John 15: 9 – 17

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

A doorway into the Divine, may Your word read and preached be a source of inner illumination for us. May we see You with the eye of the heart. In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

‘While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.’ The setting for this outpouring of God’s Spirit was in the home of Cornelius, a centurion of the Roman Empire. Cornelius lived in Caesarea, a city on the shores of the Mediterranean and the seat of power of the Roman governor. Situated seventy miles north west of Jerusalem, it was from Caesarea that Pontius Pilate would travel each year to Jerusalem in order to reinforce the garrison at the time of Passover. The Greek historian Polybius said that centurions were chosen for their careful deliberation, constancy and strength of mind. It was in the home of the centurion Cornelius that Peter spoke and the Spirit descended.

If in the mind’s eye, we take ourselves into that home, stand with the family and friends of Cornelius, picture the apostle Peter poised

before us, perhaps we too can feel the Spirit of God fall upon us. It was while Peter was speaking that the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word. The Jewish believers were astounded that the Spirit was poured out on the Gentiles. Immediately, the Gentiles were baptised. There are clear echoes in this ancient narrative of the first Pentecost in Jerusalem. In Scripture, we are to see with the heart. In our meditation, as we stand in that room, we may gently bring to mind the consciousness of our own baptism. In the Zohar, in the Jewish mystical tradition, the Spirit of God is spread over the people of Israel like a scarf is spread over the head of a child. It was to the home of Cornelius that Peter had journeyed and there the people felt the Spirit.

Pentecost is the giving of the Spirit; it is the Spirit that gives spiritual life. Filled with the Spirit of Jesus, Pentecost is the moment that the community begins to live the life of Jesus. Behind the Christian faith narratives of Pentecost lies the Jewish Pentecost, the Feast of Weeks or Shavuot. In the Book of Exodus, Shavuot is the Jewish celebration marking the wheat harvest in the land of Israel but, more importantly, it commemorates the day on which God gave the Torah to the tribes of Israel. While Passover celebrates the day that the

Hebrew people were freed from the slavery of Pharaoh, Shavuot is the moment that the community began to live the life of the Torah. For the Jewish community, it is living the Torah that gives life. The early Christian community placed the life and Spirit of Jesus alongside, or in contrast to, that of the Torah for the Jewish community.

Jesus said, 'Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there I am in the midst of them'. In the Jewish tradition, it is said that where two are sitting together and words of the Torah are spoken, the Divine Presence, the Shekinah, rests with them. In Islam, the Sukainah, the Spirit of Tranquility, descended upon the Prophet Muhammed. In Islamic mysticism, the Sakinah is sent into the heart of believers; it brings stillness. It is the Divine Presence. I hope you see the strong parallels with the handing over of the Torah, the Spirit of Jesus at Pentecost – in the home of Cornelius with Peter – and the Sakinah descending into believers' hearts. In the 21st century, though there be real differences of doctrine, we are called to see and honour the Divine Presence in the followers of other world faiths. We are to stand in the home of Cornelius and experience it for ourselves.

In the First Letter of John, we read, 'Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God'. To be born of God is to be of the essence of God, to have the DNA of God running through our being. The author wants us to see that, in living the life of Jesus, a life of self-sacrifice, of self-emptying, we are of God, born of God. In the Gospel of St John, we hear Jesus say, 'Abide in my love'; in other words, dwell in Me, in My love; pitch your tent here! We are to absorb ourselves in the Divine Absolute, in the Eternal Essence that pervades all things, and be at one with the Spirit of Jesus. This is divine intoxication. It is this spiritual insobriety which astounds and changes the world.

On 2 October, 2006, Terri Roberts heard that there had been a shooting near her home, at a school in the Amish community. The news was bad enough but it turned to horror for her when Terri learned that the shooter was her son, Charles Carl Roberts. A husband and father of three, Charles entered a classroom, ordered the boys to leave and shot ten girls, five of whom died, with one suffering permanent brain damage. Charles then turned the gun on himself. At the funeral of her son, to her surprise, members of the

Amish community not only came to offer their sympathy and support for the loss of her child but surrounded her in order to shield her from the press. They welcomed her and included her in helping to care for the brain-damaged child at mealtimes.

Rightly, we are cautious in our claims about God. Rightly, we acknowledge that our words fail, always fail, to describe the reality and nature of God. God is always elusive, hidden and in the darkness; the Divine is always beyond our comprehension. The mystics speaks of God as 'Nothingness'. Even though Jesus calls us friends, Jesus is a friend like no other; no other friend is the origin of the universe. There is always a darkness, an abyss, in Jesus which we cannot penetrate. Yet, for all our caution and qualifications about God, about the Spirit of God, the Divine Presence is present and lives are changed.

The late Rabbi Hugo Gryn was a prisoner at Auschwitz. He told the story of one day seeing a jet stream in the sky. For a moment, he believed that God was about to intervene to put a stop to the ghastly evil of the camp. Later, in keeping Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, Rabbi Gryn found himself sobbing for hours. He wrote:

Never before or since have I cried with such intensity and then I seemed to be granted a curious inner peace. Something of it is still with me. I believe God was also crying....I would like you to understand that in the builder's yard on that Day of Atonement, I found God. But not the God I had churlishly hung to until those jet streams dissolved over Auschwitz. People sometimes ask me 'Where was God in Auschwitz?' I believe that God was there Himself – violated and blasphemed. The real question is 'Where is man in Auschwitz?'

It was on Yom Kippur, in the liturgy of atonement, in the words of Torah, that Rabbi Gryn found inner peace, a peace this world cannot give.

It is remarkable that in the trenches of the First World War, only a few months before he died, the soldier poet Wilfred Owen, following the words of Jesus, wrote of those around him who, loving the greater love, lay down their lives; 'they do not hate'. Jean Vanier writes, 'Jesus is in us and we are in Jesus'. The prayer of Cardinal Newman is a prayer for us:

Shine through me, Jesus,
and be so in me
that every soul I come in contact with
may feel your presence in my soul.
Let them look up and see no longer me
but only Jesus!

In the city of Caesarea, in the home of Cornelius that day, perhaps what those who gathered saw and heard was not Peter, but Jesus.

Perhaps in your meditations, you see Him too.

Amen.