

Sermon, Trinity XVII 2006 God's comforting presence

How can we know and feel the comforting presence of God? Our faith is certainly grounded in history, but we have a tendency to think of it as a long time ago and in a land far away. *Sabbath rest by Galilee, the calm of hills above*. It feels a long way from London and the 21st century. The great and much loved studies of Jesus also seem to imprison him in the past. I'm thinking of Albert Schweitzer's *Quest for the Historical Jesus*. Or the luridly romantic 19th century bestseller, Ernst Renan's *Vie de Jesu* which paints Our Lord as if he were Algernon Charles Swinburne on a bad day.

But Jesus is not locked in the past. He is unlocked throughout all time. We find hints of his presence everywhere. Right at the start of *Genesis* we find Abel who is a shepherd and obedient to God – prefiguring Jesus who is supremely obedient and also the Good Shepherd and the Sacrificial Lamb. Remember the mysterious King who brings out bread and wine, Melchizedek. Melchizedek is Hebrew for *righteous king*. Christ is the Righteous King who gives us the bread and wine of his Body and blood. In such examples as these, you might say God is leaving his calling cards all over the place.

Remember the three men who turn up at the door of Abraham's tent and Abraham addresses them as *God*. This is one of the earliest images of the Blessed Trinity. These things are not accidental but providential. God is setting a trail for us and we must learn how to track him. Turn to the great verses in the prophet Isaiah, seven hundred years before Christ:

Behold a Virgin shall conceive and bear a Son....

For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given... and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, the mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace

And again, some years later:

He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

Or what about that strange moment when Shadrach, Mesach and Abednego are in the burning, fiery furnace and there *appeareth one beside them like unto the Son of Man?*

Here is comfort for you. For here are prophecies of Christ hundreds of years before his birth. And they came true. Now prophecies are not magic. We're not talking about *The Daily Mail* astrologer. Prophecies are given by God in response to intense devotion and concentration and usually in creative, poetic ecstasies. The prophets probably did not entirely understand the meaning of what they said. But their visions turned out to be certainties. This is what I mean when I say that God is not imprisoned in the past but unlocked in history. He gives us these sure signs of his presence all the time.

Let us go forward to after the events of the New Testament. Consider the lives of the great saints and doctors of the church. How St Augustine went into a garden, took up a letter of St Paul and his whole being was instantly flooded by the love of God. Of St

Thomas Aquinas, who is to theology what Bach is to music. When he was fifty, his pupils asked him to write another book for them. He came down from celebrating Mass and refused. He said, *Beside what I have just seen, all my writings are but as straw*. Wouldn't we like to know the contents of that particular vision!

Or leave the theologians and come into the world of the musicians. When we hear the *Lachrymosa* from Mozart's *Requiem*, that is not a portrait of grief: it *is* grief. It is precisely the musical embodiment of spiritual loss, religious dread. Think of Bach as he imitates the orbits of the planets in *The Art of Fugue*. And then you will see exactly what he meant when he said, *All I have done is to the glory of God*.

But there is something else, something to increase our sense of wonder, to comfort us with the certainty of God's presence, to bring us joy, the joy that no man taketh away from you. It is set out formally in philosophical poetry that goes back five hundred years before Christ. Plato's apprehension that this world, the world of appearances, is an image, a symbol of the world beyond. For the Christian that insight, great as it is, won't quite do. For Plato thought that this world is inferior to the world beyond. Since the Incarnation, Christians know that the other world *is embodied* in this world and that consequently the world of here and now is *real*.

This true apprehension is what the poets strive to realise in their verse. The natural world is possessed by the supernatural presences. Let's hear this from the horse's mouth, Shakespeare: *Be not affeared, the isle is full of noises*. Or Christopher Marlowe in *Faust* where he looks up into the milky way and exclaims *See where Christ's blood streams in the firmament!*

Or listen to this:

*Midwinter spring is its own season
Sempiternal though sodden towards sundown,
Suspended in time between pole and tropic,
When the short day is brightest with frost and fire,
The brief sun flames the ice on pond and ditches,
In windless cold that is the heart's heat,
Reflecting in a watery mirror
A glare that is blindness in the early afternoon*

The natural world is the express image of God's person. It's subtle. It goes deep. The three dimensions of our world are the footprint of the Blessed Trinity. And when we look at the world, when we have time, when we don't just pass by unthinking, blundering on we touch the central mystery of God's presence in the here and now. You look at that scene, of the cliffs over the sea; at the river's bend, the kingfisher, *this morning's minion* and you know for certain that *the world is charged with the grandeur of God*

Or think of the ordinariness transfigured, the sublime intensity of the little verses of T.E. Hulme:

*A touch of cold in the Autumn night
I walked abroad,*

*And saw the ruddy moon lean over a hedge
Like a red-faced farmer.
I did not stop to speak, but nodded;
And round about were the wistful stars
With white faces like town children*

There is a simple natural night scene. Yet the poem speaks with certain authority of something beyond, the beyond in the midst. And when this sense comes over you, you are indeed overcome. And you are visited with an ecstasy like that visited on Isaiah the prophet. And you want to cry out like Goethe *Stay, thou art so fair!* And yet, though we get a glimpse of the transcendent reality, we cannot contain it until it is our time to leave this world for the next.

And God teases us in the playful world of mathematics and physics: think, the mathematical instrument for calculating the properties of the perfect circle, the symbol Pi, is itself so imperfect and un-reconciled that its precise value cannot be calculated. Modern physics knows that the laws of nature themselves are bizarre: the photon which contrives to be in two places at once, and alters its velocity and position if you look at it. The photon, the smallest bit of everything that there is. And the photon is light. *Let there be light.* Quantum mechanics is one of God's jokes.

Supremely God reveals his eternal presence with us in human relationships. Just for example, take marriage. *Husbands love you wives as Christ loves his Church, loving and caring for it even as his own flesh.* So the presence of God is always with us. You seek God's comfort and the certainty of this presence? Just ask him for it. O God, take away all my faithlessness and fear, and give me the certainty that thou art ever near. Make me bold to look for thee, that I might ever find thee.