

Sermon (#4)

Sunday 30th April 2017. Gospel Reading: Romans 10:11-20

Dancing with God. (1312 words)

May all I say and all we think be in harmony with you, God within, God beyond, God of all wisdom.

Amen.

Please be seated...

Now I don't profess to be a great thinker, in fact I know that I have the propensity for rather concrete thinking that can sometimes result in my thinking being rather circumscribed. But I am a wonderer. I spend a fair amount of my time wondering about things, especially about my faith and the meaning of scripture and Christian teaching. I'm curious; I question, speculate and ponder and I look upon wondering as being a rather healthy pursuit. Wondering doesn't always produce definitive answers, but it can open us to new possibilities; it takes us into the realms of exploration and discovery, and can be the means of moving us outside of the proverbial box. And it's this that I want to do today, to wonder, and to at least edge us towards the perimeter of the box so that we can take a peek over the edge.

Just within the first three verses of today's reading from Paul's letter to the Romans we hear three distinct voices; an allusion to the Prophet Isaiah, Paul himself, and a direct quote from the Prophet Joel. Here, in microcosm, we have an illustration of

what the New Testament scholar J Ross Wagner refers to as ‘the deep and pervasive influence that Israel’s scriptures exert on the shape of (Paul’s) thought and on the contours of his apostolic ministry’¹. The Hebrew Scriptures permeated Paul’s very being like water permeates a fish. Paul not only knew the Hebrew Scriptures like the back of his hand, but he also used them by juxtaposing, conflating and shaping passages from various Hebrew texts in order to illuminate and reinforce his own perspectives and convictions. We see a simple example of this in verse 13 where Paul quotes Joel in saying ‘for everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved’. Joel, of course, when referring to ‘the Lord’ was meaning God, but here Paul uses ‘Lord’ with reference to Jesus, thus attributing the glory and divinity that would previously have been exclusive to God, to the one whom Paul believed to be the Messiah or Christ.

But what does it mean to say that ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved’? Well earlier, in verse 9 of this chapter, we hear Paul saying ‘If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved’. Now, if you type into an internet search engine ‘what do I have to do to be saved?’, there’s a fair chance that it won’t be too long before you’ll find this quotation, and it’s usually taken to mean that if you *assent* to the statement that Jesus is Lord and *believe* that God raised him from the dead, then you’ll be saved. But, and here I start with the wondering...

¹ Wagner, J. R. (2003) *Heralds of the Good News*. Boston: Brill Academic Publishers.

- ♦ I wonder if 'calling on the name of the Lord' means something more than *assenting* to, and *believing* in, various declarations or doctrines...

- ♦ I wonder if this doesn't necessitate a radical and transformative renewal of our awareness and understanding of what it means to *follow* Jesus not just *believe* in him...

- ♦ I wonder if this doesn't invite us to experience within ourselves what he came to experience within himself and to emulate his life in our lives...

- ♦ I wonder if this doesn't require us to be 'transformed by the renewing of (our) minds'² so that we can put on 'the mind of Christ'³ and inhabit the Christ consciousness that Jesus had; so that we can then say with Paul that 'it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me'⁴...

- ♦ I wonder if it isn't this transformation that will enable us to see this world for what it truly is and to arrive at a deeper, richer, more direct and proximate understanding of what the Kingdom of God means.

² NRSV Romans 12:2

³ NRSV 1 Cor. 2:16

⁴ NRSV Gal. 2:20

'Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ', says Paul. So again I wonder, I wonder what implications this has for me, for us...

- ♦ I wonder if we should listen more deeply to the teachings of Jesus, to contemplate the profound wisdom that comes through the word of Christ...
- ♦ I wonder if it's only by being profoundly attentive to what we hear from him that we can ascertain its deeper meaning and truly comprehend the 'good news' that has been brought to us by those who have been sent throughout history...

The 'good news' relates to the 'kingdom of God'; to the fact that the 'kingdom of God is close at hand'⁵, 'the kingdom of God is among' us⁶. In his book 'You are the Light', a book that has been profoundly influential for me, John Martin Sahajananda says 'God is outside us, God is within us, God is among us, and God is around us... God *is* everywhere, God *was* everywhere and God *will be* everywhere'⁷.

We are called to follow the way that goes 'beyond all ways'⁸ because, although it is essential that we congregate together, that we worship together, that we pray individually and collectively and that we engage with liturgy, ceremony and spiritual practice, what Jesus was actually telling us is that there is ultimately no *way* that will

⁵ The New Jerusalem Bible, Mark 1:15

⁶ NRSV, Luke 17:21

⁷ Sahajananda, J. M. (2003) *You Are the Light*. Alresford, Hants: O Books, 43.

⁸ Sahajananda, J. M. (2003) *You Are the Light*. Alresford, Hants: O Books, 46.

take us to God because we are already **in** God, we are already where we yearn to be. And...

- ♦ I wonder if we simply have to slow down, to stop, and to open the eyes of our hearts to really see that it is 'in him (that) we live and move and have our being'⁹.

As Marcus Borg said, 'God is not somewhere else, but right here, all around us, the encompassing spirit in whom everything that is, is'¹⁰, and...

- ♦ I wonder if it is within this truth that we are broken open by the life changing consciousness of God's radiant truth and of God's luminous presence...
- ♦ I wonder if it is within this truth that we experience the 'abundant life'¹¹ that Jesus wanted for every single one of us...
- ♦ I wonder if it is within this truth that Christ 'becomes present in us' and within that 'grace filled relationship' we find ourselves, as the early church fathers called it, "dancing with God"¹².

And finally, and I hope you'll forgive me for introducing a personal note to end on, but the truly remarkable and wonderful thing is that we can be found even if we do not seek him, and he does show himself to us even if we do not ask for him...I know,

⁹ NRSV, Acts 17:28

¹⁰ Borg, M. (2006) *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*. New York: Harper One, 111.

¹¹ John 10:10

¹² Keller, D. G. R (2007) Reading Living Water: The Integral Place of Contemplative Prayer in Christian Transformation. *Sewanee Theological Review*, 50(3) Pentecost 2007, 409-462.

because this is what happened to me. God repeatedly held out his hand to me and I turned away more times than I can say, but each time he said to me, as he says to each and every one of us, 'I'll wait, I like what I see'¹³, until eventually I heard afresh the word of Christ and found myself dancing with God.

Amen.

¹³ Anonymous (2003) 'Rooms to Rent'. In Margaret Silf (ed.) *One Hundred Wisdom Stories from Around the World*. Oxford: Lion Publishing plc, 132-133.