

The God of the Now

A sermon preached by Revd Prof Rob Gilbert on Trinity 18, 25 September 2016

Refs: Amos 6.1a,4-7; 1 Timothy 6.6-19; Luke 16.19-31

Almighty and everlasting God, increase in us your gift of faith that, forsaking what lies behind and reaching out to that which is before, we may run the way of your commandments and win the crown of everlasting joy; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Forsaking what lies behind and reaching out to that which is before. A line from our collect for today, peculiarly appropriate on my last regular Sunday here as one of the priests in Wolvercote. Each time we do this – forsake what lies behind, and reach out to that which is before – we do so with hope and, I think, with faith. We take a step forward; a step into the unknown, as they say.

But if you think about it this is actually an activity at the very core of human life – stepping forward, from one thing to another; forsaking the past for the sake of the future; building on the past to *make* the future. The language of today's prayer, its poetry, speaks of big steps that make a major difference to our lives – but every step we take makes *a* difference to our lives, *everything* we do is significant. This is one of the things that Jesus wanted to teach us – no action is too small and no thought too passing to matter, to have meaning.

As some of you will know, Tim Stead, the vicar of Holy Trinity Headington Quarry, has written a book on mindfulness and Christian spirituality. There is one particular thing he says in that book which has really stuck in my mind, and it's this: "God is only and will only ever be in the present moment for us". You can't make an appointment to see God next week, you can't tell God you don't have time for him at the moment but can make a space in your schedule later on, you can only know him present to you...now. Tim says: "God is not present to us tomorrow. God is not present to us yesterday. God is only ever present to us today. But when tomorrow comes, that will be the present and God will be there too. Let us make sure, though, that we, too, are present when tomorrow comes"¹. That we are present in that moment, forsaking what lies behind and reaching out to that which is before.

This calls us to life, and life in all its fullness. [Amos, in our reading, is lamenting over the self-indulgence and time-wasting of the people – instead he wants them to really live, to be alert to the world around them, if necessary to mourn as well as be ready to rejoice, and not to dull their senses to the present moment with self indulgence.]

And life in all its fullness is the life of God, the life God shares with us in Jesus. In the reading from Timothy, Paul talks of the God who gives life to all things – the source of all being. The African saying, "I am because we are" – true enough, of course, as church communities like St Peter's prove, *I am because we are* – can be extended: I am because we are, and we are because God is. Giving life to all things, the existence of God is not a fact to be agreed to, or not agreed to, but a life to be known, and known among ourselves in our speaking and singing, in our service of one another, in our kindness and concern, in our love. Paul uses

¹ Tim Stead *Mindfulness and Christian Spirituality* pp72, 78.

wonderful phrases: God alone has immortality, God dwells in unapproachable light, God offers us the life that really is life. God is intensely present, God is always now.

One of the really profound truths about human life, I think, and one which is core to the teaching of Jesus is this: that we are most ourselves when we forget about ourselves, that human beings who are intensely present, engaged in the moment, are being most *themselves*. We are most alive when we don't know it. I've said it before, but I can't apologise because I think it very important. A musician is most themselves when caught up in their music-making, a scientist is most themselves when absorbed in their research, a friend is most themselves when focused on the one they care about. A shepherd is most themselves when they go searching for the one sheep that is lost. You are most yourself when you forget what you are doing and just get on with it. To live in the present like this is to come closer to the life of God.

Jesus was gloriously, vividly awake to this truth and as such gloriously and vividly animated by God's own life. We see this sense Jesus had in his teaching – I have a favourite comment that Jesus makes, in response to the exchange he has with the Sadducees about the woman who married seven brothers. The version I like best is St Mark's. Jesus responds to the Sadducees question like this:

"Is not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God? For when they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the story about the bush, how God said to him, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob"? He is God not of the dead, but of the living; you are quite wrong."²

I love it – such an authentic-sounding phrasing. "You are quite wrong" – as we'd say, "You just don't get it". But anyway, it is clear, God is the God of the Now – the eternal now, now for ever, the God of the living not of the dead – for to him, as Luke says, all of them – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the lot – all of them are alive³. God's eternal presence, presence in the present moment, is something we can know now: and something that God can share with us for ever.

We find this same understanding of God's vivid life, his intense aliveness, in the parables, too. One of the things about today's parable, the one about Dives and Lazarus, is that the rich man, Dives, is a procrastinator. Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow... just let me go and warn my brothers and then they at least will have a chance to save themselves. He is at least showing compassion for them. But he is someone saying: just one more chance, just one more chance, over and over again. The chance you've got is now, the moment you have is now. The moment to have compassion, as he has failed to do, was always *then*, but his *then* was never his *now* – and now it never will be. *We* have the chance to take hold of the moments we have, now and for the future.

Jesus was transfixed by his realisation of God's eternal presence in the now. God defines what it is to be fully alive, and Jesus is the image of that total life in a human being.

In this morning's parable, Abraham says to Dives, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead". To look to be convinced by a celestial display of power forgets that God is the God of the living, of life, of now, not, as someone once said, a God who does conjuring tricks with bones. When I was a student in Durham, David Jenkins who died a fortnight ago was the bishop, and I admired him very much: he helped open for me an understanding of how the divine and the human come together in Jesus, and in us. He writes: "Jesus who is the Christ is the way God acts. Jesus Christ

² Mark 12:24-27.

³ Luke 20:38.

is the visible embodiment of the pattern and powers of the kingdom”⁴. “Jesus Christ is the purposive and personal pattern of God and [humankind] in union.”⁵ “Jesus Christ shows that a truly human person...is an individual who is wholly and consistently open” open to the world in which human beings live, and open to other people⁶. So, of course Jesus rose from the dead, but he did so not to prove a point but to transform our understanding of what it means to be alive.

I am because we are, and we are because God is: as I forsake what lies behind and reach out to that which is before I want to thank you for helping me to be alive in this place – you have given me so much, and helped me to become a little bit more like what I believe God wants me to be. Thank you, and God bless you all, now and for ever. Amen.

⁴ David Jenkins *The Glory of Man* p85.

⁵ David Jenkins *The Glory of Man* p102.

⁶ David Jenkins *The Glory of Man* p91.