

SERMON – REVD CHRIS BAKER AT DPURC ON 23RD FEBRUARY 2020

A few weeks ago I was sitting in the congregation here when the hymn was announced: *Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us*. I turned to the person sitting on my right, who was Liz Barrow, and whispered, *We had this hymn at our wedding*. Later in that same service the hymn announced was *Love Divine, all loves excelling* at which point Liz whispered to me *This was our wedding hymn*. Hymns are extraordinarily powerful things. They have the power to transport us back in time to certain events, certain experiences in our lives, important events, trivial events, joyful events, sad events. They make a connection. And not only across time but hymns can transport us over hundreds, even thousands of miles linking us with people we know or have known, linking us with communities, church families, special events or celebrations. And so deeply are some hymns embedded in our being that they are particularly helpful for those people who are suffering from dementia, so it is good that here in Downing Place Church we can plan and hold services precisely with these people in mind.

But if hymns are powerful, how much more so are the Scriptures. Many of us here today are of a generation who were made to learn parts of the Bible by heart. It may have been the significant verse - a text for the week - or it may have been a passage such as the Ten Commandments or one of the Psalms - of course, in the King James version. Psalm 23 *The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want*. or Psalm 46 *God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble*. Or maybe it was from the New Testament - the Beatitudes. *Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*. These words, these passages are deeply rooted in our minds and they take us back, maybe back to our youth, our childhood, but also way back, deep into our faith's history. In our quest for faith we are linked to people of faith so that across the years there is a coming-together of insights and ideas.

A few years ago David Rosenberg invited some writers to go back and explore their early experiences of the Bible and some specific books of the Bible, and to contrast those early experiences with feelings reading those same passages today. We can all do this and share in the same experience and as we do it we find we are looking at the words from a different perspective. The Bible was probably the first adult book we read and we may have approached it with childlike simplicity, believing, trusting with a certain naivety. Our attitudes may have changed. Life's experiences, world events may have challenged our faith, challenged that childlike trust. So, for example, the Psalmist's words - *God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble*. Is that a statement of fact, a statement of faith or wishful thinking? So our experience will undoubtedly have changed our understanding of God.

We're on a journey and David Rosenberg suggests that as we read, as we experience again and again the Word, it is like a bridge, perhaps a bridge with many arches, taking us back deep into the past but enabling us to advance into the future. He says, *'What takes the place of an actual communion, metaphorically speaking, is the sacrament of reading and interpreting scripture, so that communion with the Bible might be called the central sacrament*. As we gather round the Bible we share in the communion of the Word.

We, in our Reformed tradition, tend to assume that this is true of all Christians. It has not always been so. The author Catherine Texier was brought up in a different tradition and for her the Bible did not feature in her faith. She writes, *The Bible was for the Jews and the Protestants, the enemies of Christ and the Heretics. It reeked of sulphur and cold rationalism. It was used by a people so puritanical that they eschewed the mysteries and the pomp and the drama of the sacraments for a scholarly life, looking for God among the word. How could God be in a book since he was hovering above us in the sky in the dazzling light?*

We are probably all guilty at times of a lack of charity, of not trying to understand the stance of those with whom we may disagree, and this is a good example. I would be proud to be thought something of a puritan, we stand in a great history and indeed am proud of our scholarly tradition but to suggest that this means that we do not see the glory of God, and miss the drama of the sacraments is far from the truth. As we approach the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the communion of the Word takes on a whole new dimension and we see the glory of God, not perhaps in colourful

vestments and high staging but in the wonder that in Jesus God took human form and at that supreme moment he took the ordinary things of life, bread and wine, and used them to draw us in to be his blood-sisters and brothers. The glory is in the ordinary, which is itself quite extraordinary.

If we travel on our journey of the Communion of the Word we find the Scriptures come alive. Stories leap off their pages so that we can share in them. Too often in church we get to hear only a fragment of a story but if we take a larger view we can become not merely readers but participants.

Take this account of Moses going up Mount Sinai. We can gather at the foot of the mountain with this travelling people and we may feel the apprehension, the fear, seeing our leader go up in to the cloud and leaving us bereft. He has led us out of Egypt to the uncertainties of the wilderness and seemingly left us. And then it is as if the mountain is on fire and we have a vivid sense of the glory of God and it was terrifying. It was a long time before Moses reappeared with the stone tablets of the law. The glory lay in these words which were to form the character of the nation and guidelines for all humankind.

Over the past few weeks we have been very aware of how Matthew has shaped his version of the Gospel to echo the Moses saga. As Moses went up the mountain to receive the Law so Jesus went up a mountain to deliver what we call the Sermon on the Mount. And now again, Jesus goes up a mountain, not alone this time but with his closest companions, Peter, James and John. It was a crucial, a pivotal moment in the life of Jesus. Just a week previously Peter had put into words the conviction of the disciples - that Jesus was the Messiah. It was an important moment for Jesus, perhaps a thrilling moment for Jesus because it showed that these followers, these disciples, were making progress; they were beginning to understand him. And so it was time to take them further on their journey of faith as he explores his concept of Messiahship - that of the suffering servant, a role which would lead to betrayal and death. It appalled the disciples, so much so that Peter blurts that it could not be. Quickly he is slapped down by Jesus. We can imagine the atmosphere among the group as they walk on their way: Peter nursing his bruised ego, others bewildered and uncertain. So then Jesus takes the three, apart from the others, and leads them up the mountain and exactly what happens is a mystery. We read the narrative and have so many questions but it is clear that the early Church regarded this as the central moment of the life of Jesus. At his baptism Jesus had heard the voice of God expressing satisfaction, even delight in his actions. Now, as he faced the grim future he has brought Peter, James and John to share this moment and to understand what HAS to be. Certainly on that mountain Jesus underwent a profound spiritual experience and maybe it was shared with the three disciples. Perhaps, for a few short moments, they were able to enter into the Lord's consciousness and see with his eyes. They saw the riches of the Old Testament, of law and prophesy symbolised by Moses and Elijah, all invested in Jesus. And they now heard the voice of God talking to them: *This is my beloved Son, in whom I take delight; listen to him.* It was terrifying. Of course the vision could not last but the memory of the voice of God, the communion of the living Word, remained with them. They may not have wanted to believe in Jesus' version of Messiahship, but God himself had given his stamp of approval. This they had to understand. This we also have to understand.

For we too may have had our mountaintop experiences - not necessarily on a mountain but perhaps in a solitary place, or indeed with others in a setting of worship. But as with the disciples the experience cannot be sustained. We cannot live on the mountain top, we have to come down and face the world as we know it. Moses came down and you will remember how, in his long absence, the people had run amok. He was appalled by what he found and there was virtually civil war until he was able to reassert his authority, to re-establish the people's allegiance to God. Jesus and his disciples came down and found the rest of the disciples frustrated and despondent at their failure to help a boy with epilepsy. And sometimes we feel that frustration and despondency when we look at the world, when we look at our society. We have glimpsed the glory but we see the need.

Ours is a society of inequality and perhaps it was always thus. The prophets of long ago railed against the inequalities in Israel and Judah, convinced that this is not what God desires. Neither does he desire a form of religion that closes its eyes to the needy. Too many in our society are left behind, ignored or marginalised. We see men and women sleeping in our streets, families made homeless and separated, driven into debt. Poverty and gross inequality are not acts of God but are structural defects in our society, defects which must be addressed and corrected. Today is marked

by many as Poverty Sunday and we are called to remember that we follow a Lord who walked with the poor, who gave hope to the hopeless and healing to those in need. In that earlier hymn Fred Kaan gave a vision of the church in which all are welcomed, all seen as equal before God, an end to 'them' and 'us'.

The Bible lies at the heart of our worship, not just as a book but as a source of divine truth interpreted by the Holy Spirit. Here we meet with the Christ of history, the man who unswervingly trod the path to the Cross and who rose again to bid us follow him as the Lord of now. As we commune with the Word, as we walk with the Lord, so is the glory revealed.