

God Wants You

19 January, 2014

Scripture lessons: Proverbs 2:1-6; Matthew 9:10-13

According to one prominent strand in the Bible, the purpose and goal of human life is to seek and obtain wisdom – with the very precise meaning of knowledge of God and His ways – that your life may be satisfying and rewarding (well, and rewarded, though that's another matter). The main focus of this in the Old Testament is in the book of Proverbs, from which we read this morning: "My son, if you take my words to heart and lay up my commands in your mind, giving your attention to wisdom and your mind to understanding, if you summon discernment to your aid and invoke understanding, if you seek Wisdom out like silver and dig for her like buried treasure, you will understand fear of the Lord and attain to the knowledge of God; for the Lord bestows wisdom and teaches knowledge and understanding." (2:1-6 NEB) God, the knowledge of God, is like a treasure to be sought, and happy is the man – and I fear that in the Old Testament it is the 'man', as women have no part in this – who finds that treasure. But it is not just in the Old Testament that this image of God as the treasure to be sought is to be found. Jesus' takes up the same image in his teaching, in the Sermon on the mount and elsewhere. For instance, "Do not store up treasure for yourselves on earth, where it grows rusty and moth-eaten, and thieves break in and steal it. Store up treasure in heaven, where there is not moth and rust to spoil it, no thieves to break in and steal." (Matt. 6:19-20) That is often read by moralists as an admonition to good behaviour that will get you into the kingdom of heaven, but apart from the understanding that it is never our good behaviours which earn a place in the kingdom of God for us, but rather God's grace, I think Jesus' reference here is again to Wisdom, in the Biblical sense, in the sense of the knowledge of God – something which no thief could ever steal. That connection is affirmed by the very next verse too: "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (6:21) – taking up a very long thread which runs throughout the Bible, that you are, or will become, what you love, worship and treasure ("they followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves" (II Kings 17:15); "pursuing empty phantoms and themselves becoming empty" (Jer. 2:5); "and Ephraim became as loathsome as the thing he loved" (Hosea 9:11)).

But while one strand in the Bible urges us to pursue God (or the knowledge of God, which is essentially the same thing, or a euphemism for the same thing), there is another and greater strand in the Bible which suggests the pursuit is going in the other direction. That is not so much in individual passages as in whole stories and accounts: that God comes into our world, seeking us. It is perhaps implied in God's walking in the Garden, though with unfortunate consequences for man (Gen. 3); it is certainly present in the account of God coming and sitting under Abram's tent flap (Gen. 18), and in God's hearing the cry of his people enslaved in Egypt and calling Moses (Ex. 3). It is the background for the whole of the argument between God and David about the building of a permanent "house" for God (a temple) where He could dwell, almost a captive rather than a dynamic and initiating force (I Chron. 17). Needless to say, it is the key to the whole of the New Testament and the idea that God continued to seek us out, literally entered our world and dwelt with us in the person of one Jesus, the Christ – and that while humankind rejected him, even as they had rejected God's overtures in the Old Testament by their disobedience), God nonetheless used the violence of their rejection as the means for finally completing the reconciliation. Liturgically, the whole of this quarter of the year is given over to this theme: Advent, our preparation for God's entry to our world; Christmas, the celebration of His coming; Epiphany, the revelation of the Christ who is now among us – though also tied into

it is the old strand of human seeking, in the story of the Magi, seeking Him from afar, and the presentation of their treasures to the Great Treasure they have found. And it reappears in other stories told by Jesus, and told about Jesus. It is there in the image of the father, in the Parable of the Two Sons – an oriental patriarch who performs the most unlikely act of running out to meet his prodigal son – most, most unlikely in light of the fact that son had previously rather literally told his father to ‘drop dead’, by requesting his part of the inheritance, as though his father was already deceased. (Luke 15:11ff). And it is there in the story of Zacchaeus – also in Luke; Luke seems particularly sensitive to this aspect of God’s initiative in coming out and seeking out), whom Jesus spots hiding up in his tree, and invites himself in for dinner (Luke 19:1-10).

Now, these chains of associations may well reveal something of how this sermon came to be, particularly for those who were at the second Sunday meditation service in December. In a meditation form I shared something of this process there – or at least some of the passages which in my own meditation came as associations while I pondered on them. It will therefore not surprise those of you who were present that I now move to the passage, from the 13th century Sufi mystic and poet Rumi, Islamic inheritor to the whole of this tradition – from which I began this whole chain of associations:

David said, “O LORD, since thou has no need of us,  
say, then, what wisdom was there in creating the two worlds?”  
God said to him: “O temporal man, I was a hidden treasure;  
I sought that that treasure of loving-kindness and bounty should be revealed.”

It perfectly epitomizes the reversal here: the Treasure has come seeking us. The story of mankind’s relation to God is not so much the story of our seeking Him as of His seeking us. We are wanted.

From that lynch pin, that idea led me out in another direction. Another association was my memory of an incident which occurred back in the first parish, a Black parish on the edge of one of New York City’s housing projects, during a discussion of abortion we were having with the Senior High Youth Group. In the course of that discussion one of the girls, reflecting on her life experience, said something which remains burned on my memory, both with regard to the issue of abortion, and to the ministry of the church in general: “If I were to be born again, I’d want to be wanted, and not just had.” They are perhaps the most terrible indictment one can imagine from a young person, reflecting a history of neglect and abuse, to say that there have been times when she thought she would have been better off dead, better off if she had never been born.

In years after that, I several times cited her comment in discussions about abortion, or about the harsh realities of urban ministry, within the larger Reformed Church in America, which is to say, a white, middle-class, mid-western, largely evangelical milieu. And invariably, someone – often, though not always, a woman – would respond with something to the effect of, ‘I hope you told her, “But you can be born again, and Jesus wants you!”’ I’m sorry, but to me that sort of canned, evangelical response just never seemed to take in a real sense for the human pain that was in her words.

And the memory of that incident in turn led me out in another direction – what I suppose we might call the ‘twist of Christmas’. And that is that in his coming, in his life, Jesus Christ comes, and reveals himself in a most unexpected way. Unlike Gautama, the prince who encounters the suffering of the world and renounces his royal prerogatives, Jesus is born

into the midst of that suffering: there is no room in the inn, so he is born in a stable; in the follow up to the story of the visit of the Magi, his family promptly become refugees, like millions of others in the Middle East today; he never sets foot in a palace, except to be condemned to death on charges of which he is innocent. He spends his career on the dusty roads and in the small towns of a backwater of the Roman Empire. As George MacLeod wrote, He was not crucified in a cathedral between two golden candlesticks, but on a cross between two thieves, on the town garbage heap, at a crossroads so cosmopolitan that they had to write his title in Hebrew and Latin and Greek.

There is a sense – an uncomfortable sense, for many of us, in our comfortable existence – that the incarnation was not so much for all mankind, but in particular for the marginal and the suffering in our midst. It is rooted back in the Exodus story, where God hears the cry of the oppressed Hebrews in Egypt; it runs through the life of Jesus; in my days in seminary it was being rediscovered under the controversial title of the ‘bias of God’ and liberation theologies. It is almost as though the feminist poet Adrienne Rich was speaking for God – God as the Mother, or more properly in her poem, a “raging stoic grandmother”, in the incarnation, weaving Him/Herself into the

fibers of actual life  
as we live it, now:  
this fraying blanket with its ancient stains  
we pull across the sick child’s shoulder  
or wrap around the paralysed legs  
of the hero trained to kill...  
My heart is moved by all I cannot save:  
so much has been destroyed...  
I have cast my lot with those  
who have age after age, perversely,  
with no extraordinary power,  
reconstitute the world.

And that, in turn led me to the last three elements of this sermon. The first is the words of another poet, the black poet and artist and activist Sidney Smith – oh, much less known than Adrienne Rich, but an old acquaintance of mine from my New York years. In my chain of associations; it seemed to me at that moment that it expressed the nature of this Treasure Who is seeking us; it was read at the meditation service, and I beg your indulgence for reading it again now:

G-d is....  
in prison,  
on welfare,  
unemployable,  
was Queer bashed,  
lynched,  
ethnically cleansed,  
has cancer,  
AIDS,  
dementia,  
has stopped taking his medications,  
was raped,

is a battered wife,  
was aborted,  
is a runaway teen,  
has no insurance,  
was downsized,  
is AWOL,  
is homeless,  
was profiled at the airport,  
is stuck in traffic,  
is too old,  
is too young,  
is too smart for his own good,  
is too goddamned dumb,  
can't get laid,  
got VD,  
has poor self image,  
is afraid,  
is lonely,  
hears voices,  
has lost his faith,  
is fat,  
has acne,  
can't get a green card,  
can't vote,  
his dreams don't come true,  
he committed suicide,  
his family hates him,  
he is on death row,  
is guilty,  
was framed,  
got 20 to life,  
is a drunk,  
is a junkie,  
is in a bad relationship,  
flunked out,  
can't get credit,  
can't get a job,  
can't get published,  
can't get tenure.  
However G-d is not angry.  
There is no possibility of anger.  
None at all.  
None.

The next element, in another medium, is the woodcut that heads the bulletin this morning. It is by Fritz Eichenberg, an artist who fled Nazi Germany for America, where he became a Quaker, and frequently published in the Catholic Worker – where this woodcut originally appeared.

Which leads me to the final element: the passage from Matthew, which we also read this morning: Jesus' response to the Pharisees, who questioned his sitting at table with "bad characters". Given the importance of dietary laws and purity laws for the virtuous Jew of that day, who one sits at table with is almost as important as who one goes to bed with, for Christians today, and the Pharisees could not see themselves as being in solidarity with such lost souls. And yes, Jesus' reply accepts the judgement that they are "sick" and "sinners", and perhaps that is patronizing – although I suspect many of them would have accepted (perhaps a bit grudgingly) about themselves; and yes, we will leave aside the implied question of whether there are any "healthy" and "virtuous" people, who do not need the invitation and presence of Christ. We need only affirm that each of us, in our own ways, is at that same table, in that same breadline, not standing apart from them and "ministering" to them, but in solidarity with them, and with the God who is in solidarity with us, the