

The Voice of One Crying out in the Wilderness

There is a certain word in Hebrew; the word is *shuv*, and it means “to turn”, or, in some cases, “restore”. So, for example, in that psalm that Carol read to us, Psalm 126, it talks about God *restoring* the fortunes of Zion. The same word—the word *shuv*—is used to speak of “repentance.”

However, what I would like to focus on, in particular, is the way in which God “turns” towards us. The so-called “Aaronic benediction” of the book of Numbers of the Old Testament has—“The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you, and be gracious unto you....” So, in the “shine upon you”, God is, in the imagery of the Old Testament, turning his face, turning himself to us. We also hear, in the Old Testament, how God visited his people Israel, who were in slavery in Egypt. He visited them, he “turned himself toward them”, and brought them out of Egypt.

Our passage from John’s gospel—peculiarly perhaps—says nothing about repentance. All the other gospels say that John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. In the wording that we have in John’s gospel, there is no direct mention of that, although, as we go along in the passage, we hear that John the Baptist called Jesus the “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world”.

In John’s gospel, there is the same sort of notion that God has—really—turned towards us in Christ. The Word that enlightens everyone in the world “became flesh, and dwelt among us. We have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” So the emphasis is on God’s “turning” towards us. That’s something to reflect upon, particularly at this time of year, when we speak of the birth of Jesus, and the incarnation of the Son of God. God has come to us—Immanuel—blessing us.

Now the passage—I’m really covering all the passages today, the scripture that has been read, leaving out, perhaps, to some degree, much mention of the passage from Isaiah, where there is a really a description of the consequences of God turning to us. The mourning receive comfort; those in prison are released, the poor have good news preached to them—all of that is a consequence of God turning to us.

But the focus that I would like to have is really from Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians, chapter 5. As a result of God turning towards us, we, of course, turn to God. And the passage from the first letter to the Thessalonians describes this in some detail.

So, for example, he says, “Rejoice always.” That’s one of his encouragements of the people. “Rejoice always.” Now, how is that possible? How can we rejoice always? Well, it’s only on the basis of the fact that God, in his grace, has turned himself to us, for blessing and deliverance. It’s on that basis that we can “rejoice

always” and that, even in the midst of difficult times, we have that basis of joy within our lives.

The apostle also says, “Pray without ceasing.” And again, that seems to be physically impossible—to “pray without ceasing”. But it makes sense, in some respects, in that God is eternally oriented towards us in Christ, has given us of his Spirit, in order that we may pray. So the possibility of prayer “always” is there for us.

We have that famous evening hymn that we occasionally sing, which speaks of God’s praise being uttered all around the world, over the period of twenty-four hours. Well, in a way, the prayer “without ceasing” involves not just ourselves but the whole world; the whole world is involved in this prayer, thanks to God’s first turning himself to us in grace and love.

The apostle Paul encourages us to “give thanks in all circumstances”, which sounds a bit like “rejoice always”; and the two are not too distant from one another. But some of you may be aware that what we celebrate after this sermon is completed, and later on in the service, is what some Christians refer to as the “Eucharist”.

Now, “eucharist”, literally means, in Greek, “giving thanks”. And so, certainly, we are going to give thanks [in the context of the Sacrament of Holy Communion]. And the reason why it is called “giving thanks” is that Jesus, prior to the actual distribution of the bread and wine, gave thanks. In the reading that we have from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, “he took bread, *blessed*—that’s in place of thanks—*blessed*; he took bread, *blessed*, and broke it, and said... So the [word] “eucharist” is really taken from that action, on the part of Jesus. But, through communion, of course, we give thanks, through these elements, through this action in which we participate, for God’s goodness to us, for God’s saving grace to us, in Christ.

But Paul says, “Give thanks in all circumstances.” Well, in light of faith, and in light of activities such as this [i.e. sharing in communion], we can detect in our lives, through the circumstances which we experience, signs of God’s grace, signs in which God is seeking to lead us on, bless us, bring us closer to himself. And so, we can give thanks “in all circumstances”— taking a little bit of discernment on our part to do so.

The apostle says to these Christians in Thessalonica, “Do not quench the Spirit.” Sometimes, in our lives, we are governed, as Kierkegaard says, by “necessity”. We are governed by “necessity”, and simply do what is required, perhaps, but forget that God gives “possibility” to us, “great possibility”. And we need to be open to the “possibility” which God has for us through his Spirit.

“Do not despise the words of prophets” — according to this translation. There are those whom we hear, who speak to us the Word of God, who speak on behalf of God; that’s really what prophets are. “Thus says the Lord,” said Jeremiah, and others. They speak on behalf of God. And, to hear the words of people who speak a word

from God is important, is critical for us, to respond to what God's will is for us in our lives.

“Test everything. Hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.” God comes to us in goodness; and we respond in kind; or we are called to respond in kind, with a manner of life which is in keeping with the Holy One's approach to us in Christ.

Now I added to the lectionary reading additional verses, which have to do, most particularly, with our relationship with one another, with our neighbour. So, God has turned to us in Christ, has “visited his people”. And, therefore, we turn to God in the various ways that the apostle enunciates—joy, prayer, thankfulness, not quenching the Spirit, not despising the words of prophets, holding fast to what is good. But also, as part of the orientation towards God, is responding to others in a way which is in keeping with God's own approach to us. And so Paul says, among thing things,

And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another...

Now I have just a brief quotation from this Christian philosopher whom I have been reading—Soren Kierkegaard, who wrote some time ago, over 150 years ago. But this what he has to say,

From the Christian point of view, everything—absolutely everything—should serve for edification. [Maybe it's not a word that we use too often; but “from a Christian point of view... absolutely everything should serve for *edification*.] The sort of learning, which is not, in the last resort, edifying, is precisely, for that reason, un-Christian. Everything that is Christian must bear some resemblance to the address which a physician makes beside a sick-bed; although it can be understood only by one who is versed in medicine, yet it must never be forgotten that it is pronounced beside the sick-bed.

So [to repeat], “everything from the Christian point of view—absolutely everything— should serve for edification.” And this, of course, is in keeping with the approach of the apostle Paul, when he urges, “admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all.” So, as God has turned himself to us, we, in our relationships with one another are to be “edifying”, in the sense of sometimes “admonishing”, “edifying” in some sense as “encouraging”, “edifying” in not repaying evil for evil, but overcoming evil with good.

And why should we do all of this? Why should we orient ourselves to God who has turned himself to us in Christ, who has visited his people? Well, because there is something that is most important in life, and that is our connection, our relationship,

with God.

May the God of peace himself [says the apostle Paul] sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

There is something that is absolutely critical in our lives that we need to focus upon, and which Paul enunciates quite clearly—this relationship with God, and that we not to fall out of this relationship.

But he concludes with hopeful words to us all. He says, “The one who calls you [who calls *you*] is faithful, and he will do this.” God has turned himself to us in Christ. We orient our selves to God as spiritual beings. We endeavour, in our relationship with others, to be “edifying”. And we do all of that to be in relationship with God, above which there is nothing more important. God enables us to do just that. Thanks be to God.