

**Genesis 29: 15-28**

**Romans 8: 26-39**

**Matthew 13: 31-33 and 44-52**

A few weeks ago, I was at the Church of England's General Synod in York.

Amid my maiden speech (not the subject of this sermon), and private members motions on welcoming transgender people and on condemning gay conversion therapy – both clearly carried – these were heady times.

There was a lot of conversation.

And at times pure drama on the floor of Synod.

Fast forward a few days and I was in France – not on the Riviera with my feet up I hasten to add.

But on what I like to call a 'working retreat'.

Deep in the French countryside, north of Limoges. Hill country, forests and lakes.

Staying in a cottage dating from the 1830s. No internet. On my own. Watching the sun rise and the sun set.

Doing some reading, some thinking and some writing.

Suddenly General Synod seemed an awfully long way away.

And frankly not so important.

Hmm, so what is important?

That seems a good kind of question to reflect on as we head into August. I hope you have your holiday reading at the ready!

One of the things I have been reflecting on – again think about my journey from General Synod to rural France – is the relationship between our actions – our 'activism', as Church, if you like – and what lies behind it, what resources it, which, if we are serious about our Christian discipleship must be an encounter with the living God.

And what I have found is that once one is on the lookout for this point, it seems that all the serious spiritual writers make it.

Michael Ramsey, former Archbishop of Canterbury, tells a nice story – a bit of a caricature but not wide off the mark – of two kinds of Christian...

One who, he says, takes the words of the Magnificat "in deadly earnest".

He, or she, “knows that...discrimination is blasphemy, that poverty and hunger have something urgently to do with Christianity.

That we must “stand up and be counted”.

And that Christian spends their time in “the organising of protests and campaigns, in leading the people in demonstrations for the causes which fire her, as well as in generous philanthropic actions”.

“But how large can be the defects of such a ministry”, Michael Ramsey says.

Stirred into protest about the misdeeds of others: what about our own sins?

What about the “knowledge and love of God”?

What about holiness?

What about the hope of heaven?

Then there is another kind of Christian, Michael Ramsey says.

“Deeply imbued with the priority of the spiritual and the integrity of the gospel”.

The talk is of salvation and personal conversion...

...of righteousness and judgement to come, of repentance from sins.

And yet Michael Ramsey says, the trouble with this kind of life is that it can be lived with “blinkers” about the environment in which Christian commitment needs to be lived out.

Which, in turn, can lead to profound discontent with Christianity, and with the Church.

‘Converted to what?’ people ask. ‘Saved for what?’

(Michael Ramsey ‘The Priest and Politics’ in *The Christian Priest Today*, 1972)

The theologian Leonardo Boff makes a similar point.

The East London Anglo-Catholic priest, Kenneth Leech, does too.

So, what is the message here? For us to reflect on this August perhaps.

The message is this:

It is not about ‘Our Father’ or ‘Our bread’.

Singing and dancing for joy in having a Father in heaven who is preparing a place for us, forgetting the “our bread”, and with it the cries of the hungry

But nor is it about striving to create the conditions where the hungry will be fed, and, in turn, forgetting “Our Father” as the only source which will ultimately satisfy.

Jesus brings Father and bread together – “in sacred alliance”.

The divine and the human. They cannot be separated.

And getting this right is a salvation matter.

(Leonardo Boff, *Christianity in a Nutshell*, pp. 71-72)

Or to put it another way still...

The spirit of inner prayer (attentiveness to God) and the prophetic voice “are not two alternative ways” of being Christian.

“They are inseparable in a healthy Christian life” and if they are not held together “both decay”.

(Kenneth Leech, back cover, *Prayer and Prophecy: The Essential Kenneth Leech*, edited by David Bunch and Angus Ritchie)

So, if you tend to lean one way, don’t neglect the other.

And if you tend to lean the other way. Be careful. Strive for some balance.

And I am supremely grateful that in this community there are people who compensate for my particular proclivities!

So, to our readings.

Do today’s readings help us in any way with the themes I have been reflecting on OR do they push us in new or unexpected directions?

In our Genesis’ reading, we have the story – a rather graphic story at times – of Rachel and Leah’s betrothal to Jacob.

It is patriarchy through and through. Little word of what Rachel and Leah think of Jacob. The men make all the decisions.

Then, there’s deceit and trickery, and, in time, jealousy and rather messy relationships.

But I think what we are supposed to see through this story is something we often struggle to see in our lives, namely how God is at work come what may.

Yes, God is at work, patriarchy notwithstanding – though we will want to speak out against such practices.

God is at work too amid trickery and deceit, including when they surface in our own lives.

And God is even at work when we sleep with the wrong person.

And yet, with our eyes pressed up against the glass of our own lives eyes, we often can't see this.

Today's old testament reading can help us here.

God is at work – even when it seems highly implausible.

And the same theme is echoed in our Romans' reading – of God's presence in all situations, in all things.

“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8: 38-39)

“If God is for us, who is against us”, Paul says (verse 31)

The question then is how do we arrive in a place where, by God's grace, we know this, where the words ring true, where they leap off the page for us?

It takes time, doesn't it?

A life time, one might say.

But I think there is something about re-connecting with the 'awe' of our lives, the awe of our existence.

The things that take our breath away.

The things that make the adrenalin pump.

That touch us to the quick.

Therein we may find God.

I heard the other day that if one travels far into space and then comes back to earth you will have aged less than those left behind.

Try getting your head around that!

Time is not quite what we think it is.

Praise be to our creator God.

I recently saw a film of the Lunar landing in 1969 – with original footage of the landing.

Quite amazing, especially in the single-mindedness with which those involved stuck to the mission!

Praise be to God for the ingenuity of the human spirit, for our determination to prevail.

I heard that scientists think they have discovered signs of quite recent life on Mars, now extinct.

Praise be to our creator God!

“For I am convinced that [nothing] will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”.

So, as we reflect on our own walk with God, whether we are Michael Ramsey’s first kind of Christian or more his second, let us return – in awe – to the source of all things.

And let all our actions – all our thinking and our speaking – be steeped in the knowledge of His love for us and for all of creation. Amen.