

## **MORNING SERVICE**

Sunday 10 January 2010, Kilcalmonell, linked with Killean and Kilchenzie

*1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Epiphany*

*preacher: Rev Martin Grashoff*

*hymns: Church Hymnary. Fourth Edition (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005)*

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### **Welcome & Intimations**

**Opening Hymn** : 'Tis winter now' (CH 234)

### **Children's Talk**

**Children's Hymn** : 'Who put the colours in the rainbow' (CH 143)

### **Prayer & Lord's Prayer**

God of our hearts and minds,  
we bless you for snow and ice,  
for sunlight, bright and golden or grey and filtered,  
for moonlight, as silver on the sea,  
for babies and for grannies,  
for food we cannot resist eating,  
and for drinks that make a party,  
for love and affection, in all their variety.  
We bless you for all, O God.

And we ask for your forgiveness  
if we abuse the light for doing the wrong things,  
if we lack respect for the very young or very old,  
if we waste food or just take too much of it,  
if we break down love.  
God in your mercy,  
HEAR OUR PRAYER.

And now as Jesus taught us, we pray:  
Our Father...  
...Amen.

**Readings** : 1 Samuel 2:18-21a, 26; 3:1 & Luke 2:41-52 (*Good News Bible*)

**Hymn** : 'Our children, Lord, in faith and prayer' (CH 632)

### **Sermon**

Sunday after Christmas I did not give you an easy listening. The first chapter of John's Gospel just isn't simple. But it is very important for Christian faith.

I tried to explain how God, according to John, is present within material world. God comes to us as a Word, says John. And Jesus, human like us, was the only one to become God's Word in the flesh. All we have is this earth and that Word of God. We need to look for God's Word in and beyond human words and deeds. Doing that we will learn to discern between words and deeds that do reflect God's presence and those that are just empty, or perhaps even evil. Doing that we will 'discern the imprint of God's love' in our own footprints. And, John says, it is Jesus who teaches us how to learn about God.

That was not really an easy listening message. But still it is the best message we can get: God *is* present in our daily reality, if we only learn to look and listen, *and* to do the right thing.

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Today we read about young Samuel, a boy serving God in a rather God-less environment. There is a priest, Eli, who obviously lost it, and over all there is a profound lack of vision. Yet, this priest does know about blessings, and Samuel does continue to serve the LORD, which basically means that he simply does the things he has to do as a junior servant in the temple. A bit of an ambiguous situation it is.

Well, our time is not much different. The Kirk, and all churches, employ quite a few people who do not really believe the things of God. There are just too many attractions outwith the traditional patterns of religion. And to be honest, our world offers many good reasons to lose faith in a God who is supposed to rule all creation. It is something ministers do not like to admit, but each of us at some point has to struggle with this: attractions outwith the church and losing faith. It would be too easy to dismiss that old priest Eli – he is much closer to each of us than we may want. Indifference lingers at the very heart of any religion.

It probably requires the innocence and open-mindedness of a boy like Samuel to keep faith. Because he does not know very much about religion, and because he does not fully understand all he is doing in that temple, things can still touch him like a fresh wind – or a breath of God. Ultimately faith is about receptivity and wonderment, rather than understanding and knowing. Knowledge is very helpful, but it comes on top of deeper experiences.

The most important and fundamental things in our life happen when we are still babies. If anything goes really wrong in the first one or two years of our life, that will be virtually impossible to restore later. However, in these first years we cannot talk and only gradually we learn to use language. Thinking can only exist through language. Without words we cannot think. So I think this clearly shows that our whole rationality is build on top of much deeper experiences.

Being a baby is not a phase in life that we will grow over and then forget. Clearly it will be covered with all these wonderful things we learn later, layer on layer, and sooner or

later be virtually hidden under it. But the things we experienced as a baby – to simply trust those who care for us, and the importance of food, for example – will always be there throughout our whole life. When our lives reach their end, they may even pop up in ways we do not expect, or like.

I realise it is tricky to say as a theologian, but I wonder if these fundamental experiences of life, the ones that come before we use any language, are actually the ones that bring us closest to God. None of my teachers ever taught me so, and it seems to make religion a bit superfluous. But still I wonder.<sup>1</sup>

The God-lessness of our time, and of many previous times in history, could very well be the result of all this wonderful brain action we produce. Technology, computers and social structures can all suggest that we are in full control. And therefore we need no God. That's obviously what our brain tells us.

But what if God is not about total control, but about unlimited care? What if God is not about solving problems, but about mystery and wonder? What if God is about the practice of love rather than satisfying our desires? Care, mystery and love are things we can to some extent understand and control. But ultimately we cannot and we just have to accept them. What if that is exactly where God is? We would rather need our baby skills than our big minds to get it.

That is really important to remember: our big minds come in second place. The mind is an auxiliary, not a purpose. Learning is absolutely vital, but it is not about piling up knowledge. It certainly includes knowledge, but it is more than that. Actually, the most important things to learn may very well be beyond knowledge. Something like that silly old song says:

*Don't know much about history...  
But I do know that I love you...<sup>2</sup>*

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We have read about Jesus staying behind in the Temple to learn. Easily we get a wrong picture of this, because we think of Jesus as someone who already knew everything. That is not the case.

Jesus is very much like Samuel. Two boys in a temple: Samuel in the former sanctuary in Shiloh, Jesus in the barely finished new temple build by king Herodes. Two boys

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<sup>1</sup> I do have an argument for that, both biological and psychological. Recent research seems to indicate we have certain centres in our brain that are responsible for religious experiences, and these are located close to the brain stem and the cerebellum. The cortex may be dominant, with men even more than with women, but still the functions controlled by the brain stem are the ones of life or death. Spiritual wisdom and psychological insight have always emphasised the importance of integrating basis functions, like breathing, eating, sleeping, dreaming and sex, with the cortex-based activities of rational and emotional life. Someone who expanded on this is Tjeu van den Berk in his book *Het mysterie van de hersenstam: Over basisfuncties, psychosomatiek en spiritualiteit* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2001 – 'The Mystery Of The Brain Stem: On basic functions, psychosomatics and spirituality' – sorry, it's in Dutch).

<sup>2</sup> Sam Cooke, 'Wonderful World' (1959).

with the skills of listening and an open mind. For both learning is a bi-directional process. They ask questions and listen to answers, but they also try to give their own answers.

In Jewish tradition that is still the same today. Learning and teaching are two things that always go together. Teachers continue to learn, and those who learn can also be teachers through their questions and answers. I think this really is how learning and teaching should be: a dialogue and a debate instead of the traditional one way traffic from a teacher who Knows All to a student who knows nothing and needs to be filled with Knowledge.

Asking questions is essential. Children, like Samuel and Jesus, can ask the kind of questions we had forgotten about. If they ask us a next time why the sun shines, perhaps we should not give them the answers about burning gases and radiation, but instead sit down with them and together enjoy the beauty of sunlight on the hills or the sea, feel the warmth on our skin and be amazed that the sun is always there. And if they ask us where God lives, perhaps we should first skip the obvious answers from our religious education, and share our puzzlement about this mystery, and try to find simple examples of where we sense something of God.

Jesus was not giving the teachers in the Temple the answers only he could know, being the son of God. He was not that pedantic. But I bet he was asking and answering from a very innocent and honest heart. That is where he had learned about God and he was really eager to find out more from those who lived so close to the Torah.

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Two weeks ago I gave you no easy reading. That is just how the Gospel according to John is written. But in reality it is about the way children can learn and teach about God. Because the One who is greater than all knowledge brought together, comes to us in the daily things of life and death. May we learn from day to day.

Amen.

**Hymn** : 'Lord, for the years' (CH 159)

### **Offering and Dedication**

#### **Prayer of Intercession**

Today we pray for the year that has just begun,  
Anno Domini 2010.  
We do not bring our wishlists, O God,  
but we do sincerely wish  
that it is going to be a good year.  
May it be prosperous,  
even if the economy is struggling;

may it be happy,  
even if people keep hurting each other;  
may it be liberating,  
even if many will not see freedom;  
may it be healthy,  
even if we know that our lives are limited.  
Into your hands, O God,  
we commit the year to come.

And therefore,  
make us work as hard as we can  
to bring welfare to all;  
make us invest in each other  
to make society more humane;  
make us supporters of freedom  
for all people on earth;  
make us live healthy  
and enjoy without excess.

In silence we remember those  
we know need us  
to remember them.  
*(silence)*

So we pray  
through Jesus Christ  
who lives among us.  
Amen.

**Closing Hymn** : 'Joy to the world' (CH 320)

**Blessing**