Sermon for 14th in Ordinary Year B

Readings: Ezekiel 2:1-5; 2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:1-13

i

Ezekiel has been given a special job by God and told from the start that it’ll be a waste of time because the people won’t listen. We don’t say that to our candidates for ministry for obvious reasons!

Ezekiel is already a priest. He knows God, we can presume. He will have had a prayer life, a good knowledge of the scriptures and known the inspiration of working in the Temple in Jerusalem. But to become a prophet, he needs more. And the Holy Spirit fills him in a new and powerful way – a way that is typical of people who have been called from within the body of the faithful to perform special tasks – like Paul’s calling on the Road to Damascus, or Wesley’s strangely warmed heart.

It’s the start of a fantastical, difficult, roller-coaster ride for Ezekiel.

* He’s struck dumb for a while after his first visit to the valley.
* His second vision is of a fiery human figure which transports him from Babylon back to Jerusalem (Ch8).
* He is constantly seeing visions and receiving messages from the Lord.
* He has the famous valley of dry bones vision in chapter 37.
* In his first vision he sees other worldly figures and wheels within wheels touching the earth that is so beloved by UFO enthusiasts.

Much of this language is standard apocalyptic stuff, bearing traditional meanings. It can be demythologised to an extent. But behind it all stands a man trying to explain the inexplicable with the only language he has.

That’s what happens to all religious experiences; it has to be understood and communicated within the world-view, culture and language of the person concerned. And of course we do exactly the same.

* With regards to what we think of experiences we read about in the Bible.
* With regard to the experiences of others today.
* With regard to understanding our own experience.

We can only make sense of our experience within the measure of our intellectual, emotional and spiritual understanding. It is very difficult to comprehend things that do not fit neatly into our existing world view.

ii

Paul too had his otherworldly experiences like Ezekiel. He spoke most famously about encountering Christ on the Road to Damascus, but here in 2 Corinthians 12, he speaks about a strange experience of going up to heaven. So strange was it, that he was not sure whether it really happened or was just a vision. He uses an old Jewish way to speak of heaven to try to explain how he felt he had journeyed through the heavenly realm before reaching the very centre and presence of God.

Paul is reluctant to explain further, but he feels he must at least mention it, since others at Corinth are boasting about their experiences and undermining Paul’s ministry.

Paul then refers to his physical ailment, or “thorn in the flesh” to keep him humble. That is an important matter. Just think of the possible effect on someone who has gone to heaven and stood in the presence of God. This ailment keeps Paul in his mortal place.

Religious experience is not just for the gullible. Paul was a sceptic when he went to Damascus. He was also one of the most highly educated people of his generation. Some of those who wish to reject the gospel accuse Paul of being a devious fraud. One thing they cannot do is accuse him of being a fool.

But we know that talking about such things does open us up to that charge. Sceptics abound both inside and outside the Church and we don’t want to be ridiculed. So people who have had Near Death Experiences, seen angels or the Virgin Mary usually keep quiet about it.

We are all quite sensibly not going to believe everything we hear. Only a fool would take such talk uncritically. But that is no excuse to avoid the issue and refuse to examine the matter.

I am prejudiced, I confess, whenever I hear such stories from Americans. It often seems you could find some Americans to believe absolutely anything and a number of very weird religions have had their birth in the USA. But when I hear such stories from sober, sensible Brits and kiwis, then I’m more inclined to listen.

I recall the NZ school principal who ‘died and went to heaven’. I recall the British Methodist minister who came down one morning to put the kettle on and saw an angel standing in her kitchen.

And before we dismiss even these paragons of common sense, let us remember that none of us would be sitting here in this room this morning had not Wesley felt his heart strangely warmed.

iii

Our reading from Matthew 6 offers sound advice: don’t parade your private religious experience in public. Paul and Wesley told of their experiences because they felt they had to, not for effect.

Our intense religious experiences are best kept behind a locked door where our heavenly Father is fully aware of what has gone on. Treasure your experiences. Test them against scripture and historical accounts of similar experiences. Guard them. For there are those who will feel threatened by such tales as an assault upon their whole world view in which such things are not supposed to happen. They will defend their world; we all do quite instinctively, but you might feel ridiculed or accused of fraudulent exhibitionism.

Many believe that because we can replicate such religious experiences by drugs, brain injury or hypnosis all such experiences must be “all in the mind” and therefore without substance. Let them be. All experience is “in the mind” in terms of our consciousness and understanding. We can be highly selective in what we term “real” and what we dismiss as “in the mind”.

For quietly, in confidence, once people feel safe, people do share such stories. When you hear such stories you realise you are walking on holy ground. People feel incredibly vulnerable at such times. So keep it behind locked doors unless you’re really sure.

Your public religion will be infused and moulded by your private religion, but don’t show your religious underwear in public. And if you do, do so only before friends and family.

Most churches are not safe places. They are public places, so do not say something private that you later regret. Either your fellow believers will be tempted to use you as ‘exhibit A’ in making their case for Christ, or you’ll find those whom you assumed to be on the same side as you will dismiss your testimony out of fear that they too might be thought a fool or a fanatic.

The Church has spent a lot of time and energy learning how to help gay and lesbian people “come out.” Many of them never do “come out.” They make the choice to keep their sexuality forever a private matter. They are not the only people who might be tempted at times to “come out” – but if you’re one of them with your vision of angels or your sight of heaven – think very carefully before you do.

The world and the Church can be very sceptical and brutal places. A bit of scepticism is helpful and guards us from foolish gullibility; the brutality and ridicule we could do without.

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