

8th Sunday after Pentecost (Pr 14) | August 7, 2011 St Paul's Cathedral, Burlington, Vermont

1 Kings 19.9-18
Psalm 85.8-13
Romans 10.5-15
Matthew 14.22-33

*...and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?'*¹

What are we doing *here*? What a question. In that story there is a change in how God is experienced. Before, God was experienced in spectacular ways – wind, earthquake, fire – but now the emphasis is on the *sound of sheer silence* as a new way to experience God. It connects with God's new instructions to the prophet. Things will change for Israel, not through spectacular demonstrations of divine power, but in the quieter political process. The mysterious *sound of sheer silence*.² So let's ask: how do we experience God and how does that experience lead us to act?

I saw on *Facebook* that prayers were asked for Kenneth Leech, who is gravely ill in hospital in the UK. I was saddened by the news. In 2000, Ken Leech was here at the Cathedral. He gave a series of talks here and around the Diocese. I got to know him here and in other places I have served. He shaped my ministry in the way he combined deep spirituality with radical commitment to social justice as the church's main work. The news included a favorite quotation.

Anglo-Catholic liturgy is not just about 'smoke and bells'; rather, it is about the incredible mystical reality of God who is both incarnate and present as well as transcendent and mysterious.

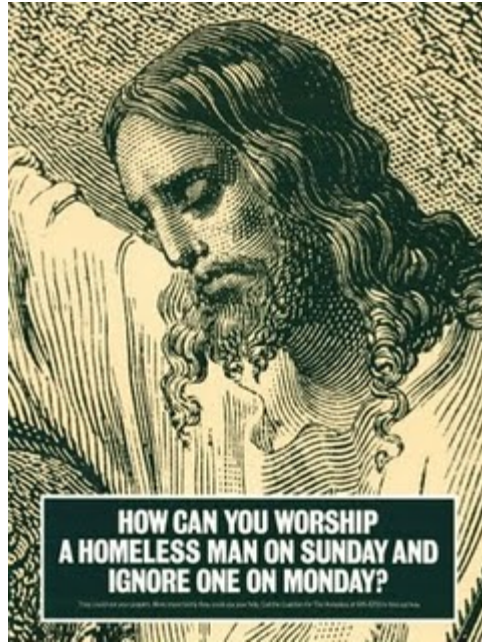
How do we experience this God – incarnate and present, transcendent and mysterious? Ken Leech found 'wrestling' was key.

It involves allowing the truth of Scripture to enter into dialogue, struggle and conflict with contemporary reality. In order for this to happen there needs to be a grappling with the Word of God, and grappling with the issues in our world, in our neighborhood, in our personal lives.

A poster reminds me of Ken Leech's teaching.

¹ 1 Kings 19.12-13.

² *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, p. 172.



Elsewhere, Ken wrote: ‘Christianity goes disastrously and dangerously wrong when Jesus is worshipped but not followed....the mistake of separating evangelism from justice, spirituality from social action, prayer from politics... The community of disciples Jesus gathered together was...characterized by mutual love.’³ How do we experience God?

I’ve just returned from vacation. During my time away I realized I’d neglected my self-care. It wasn’t really a surprise to me, but it can stare you in the face when you actually stop all the activity. I resolved to take my cardiac rehab program seriously, and the first step has been to walk daily, no matter what. A funny thing happened early Wednesday morning on my walk. It was a lovely summer morning. I was listening to some inspiring Celtic chants on my iPod, then, I noticed I was coming up to a woman going in the same direction, someone I’ve noticed before on the same route. I think she’s a bit older, but I never could guess someone’s age. I began to pass her on the left. We came side by side and greeted each other, as I said we’ve seen each other before. Then she surprised me. ‘I better pick it up,’ she said; ‘I’m not going to let you pass me!’ I responded: ‘I didn’t think it was a race.’ Then she said: ‘Oh, with me it is. Everything is a race. Life is a race.’ And off she went. She would look back to make sure she was still ahead in her ‘race’. How did an early morning walk for personal well-being on a beautiful Vermont summer day turn into a competition? How did we become so separate and cut off from each other? Better. Faster. Thinner. When did we stop thinking that we could all actually be one, in harmony with one another? Each morning I pray:

Beloved God as we offer ourselves to you this day, guide and stir us by your Holy Spirit that we may be one body, one spirit...

John Philip Newell in his new book, *The New Harmony* describes a time he was Warden at Iona Abbey in Scotland’s western isles, a religious community committed to nonviolence, justice and prayer. Since the 6th century Iona has been a place of pilgrimage with countless people drawn there to seek ‘new beginnings’. Peggy and I made a pilgrimage to Iona last July.

³Kenneth Leech, *We Preach Christ Crucified*, (Boston, 1994), pp. 5ff.

Early in our time on the island, I overheard a profound conversation between our two eldest children. They were still young enough to be profound! Brendan, five years of age, was asking our seven-year-old Rowan, ‘Where is God?’ To which she replied, ‘God is in our hearts.’ Brendan sat looking perplexed by this answer and then, after a moment of silence, said, ‘So God goes beat, beat, beat.’

When I am asked to say one thing about spirituality, I often quote my Brendan. God goes beat, beat, beat. God the very heartbeat of life, the Soul within our soul, the Presence without whom there would be no present...

We live in the midst of a new consciousness of life’s interrelatedness. And this awareness relates both to life’s essential oneness and to life’s shared brokenness. Like never before in the history of humanity, we are becoming aware that what we do to a part we do to the whole, that the parts will not be well as long as the whole is neglected, and that the whole will not be well if the parts are neglected. We know that it is meaningless to speak of being truly well as parents if our children are unwell. We know that we cannot claim true wellness for our nation as long as other nations are suffering. And we know that the human species can in no sense be considered healthy when the body of the earth is deeply infected. Wellness is found not in isolation but in relationship.⁴

So we spend time to know God for ourselves in our own heart. Beat. Beat. Beat. We act interdependently, with mutual love. In this passage from Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, Celie writes to her sister Shug during one such moment of revolutionary thinking about God for her.

Naw, that ain't it, she say. Us worry bout God a lot. But once us feel loved by God, us do the best us can to please him with what us like.

You telling me God love you, and you ain't never done nothing for him? I mean, nit go to church, sing in the choir, feed the preacher and all like that?

But if God love me, Celie, I don't have to do all that. Unless I want to. There's a lot of other things I can do that I speck God likes.

Like what? I ast.

Oh, she say. I can lay back and just admire stuff. Be happy. Have a good time.

Well, this sound like blasphemy sure nuff.

She say, Celie, tell the truth, have you ever found God in church? I never did. I just found a bunch of folks hoping for him to show. Any God I ever felt in church I brought with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to share God, not find God...

Here's the thing, say Shug. The thing I believe. God is inside you and inside everybody else. You come into the world with God. But only them that search for it inside find it. And sometimes it just manifest itself even if you not looking, or don't know what you looking for. Trouble do it for most folks, I think...

It? I ast.

Yeah, It. God ain't a he or a she, but a It.

But what do it look like? I ast.

Don't look like nothing, she say. It ain't a picture show. It ain't something you can look at apart from anything else, including yourself. I believe God is everything, say Shug. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found It.

⁴ John Philip Newell, *The New Harmony* (San Francisco, 2011), pp. xii-xiii.

She say, My first step...was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed. And I laughed and I cried and I run all around the house. I knew just what it was. In fact, when it happen, you can't miss it..

Yes, Celie, she say. Everything want to be loved. Us sing and dance, make faces and give flower bouquets trying to be loved.⁵

What new, strange and amazing worlds would open before us if we knew in our heart that we are about loving and being loved at the deepest level? What would this war-torn, poverty-ridden, climate-changed world of ours look like if we could see our stormy and driven lives are met, embraced and touched by the sublime acceptance and love of God. It really is all really about love, mutual love, interdependence.

...and after the fire a sound of sheer silence...

The Very Reverend Kenneth W. Poppe
Dean and Rector

⁵Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, pp. 177-178.