

SERMON FOR 4th SUNDAY BEFORE LENT | 10.02.2019

Isaiah 6: 1-8; Hebrews 12: 4-7, 11-15; St Luke 5: 1-11

Have you heard of the artist Bill Viola? Before Friday morning I hadn't either and yet his show at the Royal Academy – opened up to a group of 30 of us from the Dioceses of London and Southwark – was a real revelation. He has been described a *Rembrandt of the video age* and a *hi-tech Caravaggio*. The darkened gallery is full of data projectors and plasma screens but once one had got used the sheer scale of the moving images it was clear that, like the Old Masters, Viola is interested in how he can use movie techniques to create profound emotional experiences.

One of the first is a huge vertical screen showing a naked man gradually disappearing beneath the surface of a pool of water. Not in itself profound, you might think, but because Viola has played with time and slowed down the sequence, you are riveted by the question: how long can this man keep falling before he needs to come up for breath? And then some tangential thoughts come to mind about how life often overwhelms us as we sink into the routines of life – and then we realise our need to return to the surface (whatever that might be) in order to take another breath. As Viola says: *Moving images take time, and that is what I hope I can give to the viewer; time for reflection and most importantly, for self-reflection.*

Professor Ben Quash, the hugely engaging professor of Christianity and the Arts at King's College London, speaking later in the bowels of St James' Piccadilly, reminded us that the extraordinary exhibition in 2000 'Seeing Salvation' at the National Gallery, curated by Neil McGregor, had broken the old division between static art and moving image in the contemporary desire to ask those time-less existential questions: who are we and what are we doing here? *What all good art is able to do is to 'slow us down'*. 'Slow looking' is the modern name of the game although in the past the Christian tradition tended to use the word contemplation – allowing the Spirit of God to make links and form patterns where these didn't exist before. As Viola says: *it's about reflection and self-reflection.*

Dare I say that for many of us, our time on a Sunday morning is also about reflection and self-reflection? It should also offer us the opportunity for slow looking, God's Spirit opening up visions of the new, that which has never occurred to us before.

Today's Gospel is set on the beautiful shores of the Sea of Galilee, (or the Sea of Tiberias or the Lake of Gennesaret, it's all the same place). Today the fishing is much the same as it was in Jesus' day and although the population is smaller than it was, the plain on the western side of the Lake is wonderfully fertile: the word Gennesaret speaks of a garden (gan), full of riches (asher).

And here Jesus, anticipating the time when he will be excluded from the synagogues, has taken to the open road, to the hills and the valleys which he grew to know so well.

And, as we can as tourists, he would have watched the fishermen out on the lake. He would have sensed their growing frustration that they were catching nothing despite being out all night. Actually, away from their boat he would have been able to see the shoals of fish much more easily; it is said that the fish there stick together so closely that you can almost walk across their backs!

Did he create the shoal to impress the disciples? Or did he simply see what they couldn't – in the same way as James Watt saw the steam rising from a kettle and imagined how it could become a steam engine or Isaac Newton watched an apple fall and developed the laws of gravity They were not the first to see a boiling kettle or apples falling; but they were the first to make the right connection.

But who wants some kind of smart-alec to tell us these things when we are tired? Peter, not surprisingly, is tempted to tell Jesus to mind his own business and stick to carpentry! *Haven't we worked all night and still caught nothing? What makes you think you know better than us who know this lake like the back of our hands?*

And yet. There is something about Jesus that gives Peter and his brothers a second wind. *Look slowly, says Jesus; try fishing on the other side. Do it another way. Try something else. Don't give up quite yet. And the rest of the story is, as they say, history. Peter and the other disciples try the alternative: Jesus was indeed right and the men have more fish than they can reasonably cope with.*

Now that we are in Ordinary Time again and we can move readings around if we want to, I have paired today's Gospel reading with the passage from Hebrews that a few of us read at the 10am Mass on Wednesday morning.

We don't draw on this book very often, set as it is towards the back of the New Testament but I thought it acted as a really good commentary on what St Luke was offering us. The overarching message in Hebrews 12 is this: you think you are working really hard at being a good Christian but in truth, you have barely scraped the surface. And that is because you refuse to accept the discipline – and especially the self-discipline – that goes along with it. You react negatively to the slightest thing that goes wrong and think that God has abandoned you!

Don't you realise that the obstacles and the temptations that are in your way – and the effort that is required of you – are all part of the way that God is moulding and shaping you so that you can see the glory that he has prepared for you? *As Hebrews says: do not reject the discipline of the Lord or lose heart when you are being shaped by him, for the Lord disciplines those whom he loves.*

But the 'voice within' won't let go easily: *I know what I want, I know how to get it and I don't want someone telling me otherwise. I will do what I want, and who is to tell me what to do and how to behave? That might work in other churches but it is not for me...*

May I dare to suggest that is why the Church is in the state that it is in? It's not that we aren't interested in following Jesus – but who said it had to be this hard? Who said I have to ... go to Church, pray regularly, discover what the Bible has to say, give money, forgive the people who annoy me and work to build up the family of God - when I have so little time to spare? Can't being a friend of Jesus be like so many of my friendships – something to fit in around all the other things to I want to do?

What the prophet Isaiah experienced in the first reading was what the technical people call 'epiphanic': the kind of revelatory experience that blew his mind and prepared him to go in another direction altogether:

I saw the Lord, high and lifted up – and his presence filled the whole Temple. Around him the attendant’s attention was focused solely on him; the building shook - and me with it! And I realized how small I was, how insignificant and how unworthy I was to be there. He knew everything and I knew nothing. But such was his love that, instead of wanting to run away as I might well have done in the past, now I wanted to serve him too. I wanted nothing more than to be with him. And when he said he needed someone to speak for him in the world, I instinctively said: here I am Lord, send me.

When Peter sees the size of the catch that Jesus has made possible, he has the same feeling: *Go away, Lord, I am not good enough.*

And God simply waits for us to stop babbling on and he invites us to take him seriously: not the God of the cracks or the God of the spare moment but the God who comes to us when we do that slow looking.

Because when we look at these new insights slowly, we see just how much more there is available for us. Isaiah saw the majesty of God, Peter saw a lake full of fish. And us: what do we see?

Only what we make time and space for. We dither, we put things off, we make excuses. And yet if only we will listen and look slowly, he does and he will reveal how very much more there is in heaven and on earth for us to engage with and to enjoy.

Ron Dale, in his short commentary on the Gospel says, *at some point, if our membership of God’s Church is to take off, we must also be where Peter was: on our knees, admitting frankly and honestly that we are not sufficiently disciplined and ready to serve Jesus as we know in our heart of hearts we should. And then we will discover something amazing: he will simply put his hands out and get us back on our feet – ready to start again, using the words that he said to his own disciples: my grace really is sufficient, if only you will allow it to work inside you.*

Standing in the Royal Academy on Friday, the experience had very little to do with watching a naked man sinking into the waters and then coming back up for air. For me it was about learning to look, slowly, for all the possibilities that God wants to reveal. There is so much more to being a Christian than the odd Mass on a Sunday. So now that we have stopped our minds racing around, here we are, Lord: show us!