Opening Eucharist 2014-15 for Tuesday September 2 2014

Proverbs 8:1-8, 19-21; Psalm 84; 2 Corinthians 5:17-20; John 3:1-6

He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God”.

Let us start the academic year 2014-15 with a real groaner: A group of chess enthusiasts had checked into a hotel, and were standing in the lobby discussing their recent tournament victories. After about an hour, the manager came out of the office and asked them to disperse. "But why?" they asked, as they moved off. "Because," he said, "I can't stand chess nuts boasting in an open foyer."

I love chess. I have easy games, which I play over many months - I play my younger brother every day; we take one move a day, sometimes two at a weekend. And then I have tricky games - Johnny Knight – seven years old – dancing around the board while I agonize over every move. In both cases, it is the puzzle, the challenge, the numerous possibilities of each play; the game intrigues me.

It is also a fabulous metaphor. So as we watch the moves between Nicodemus and Jesus. Nicodemus comes by night (was it fear, was it embarrassment, was it nervousness); he recognizes in Jesus the presence of God – interestingly he never asks a question. Yes Jesus gives an answer: Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above’. Nicodemus is the novice; Jesus is the Grand Master. Nicodemus has a partial picture of the board, Jesus sees it all.

Nicodemus’ partial picture is good. He can recognize a life which is absorbed by the presence of God. He can see God present in Jesus. Nicodemus has been given the seed of faith. He can see the transcendent around him. He knows what a holy and divine life looks like.

From time to time, it is important for us to be reminded that we are in the business of witnessing to the gift of a life changing relationship with divine. God really is there; spend enough time alone with God and you will see and sense the divine all around us. Many have experienced the closeness of the divine – sometimes when looking at the sunset, sometimes when in deep pain, sometimes just in the quiet of the morning as we read the Bible and prepare on the day. Now Episcopalians don’t go here very often, but we should. The God we worship is a God who seeks to connect; the witness of Scripture is clear, it is a God who is experienced.

The problem for many of us is that we have lost our capacity to recognize God. In the same way an eye needs to be trained to appreciate a great painting (others it is just marks on a canvas) or an ear needs to be trained to appreciate the depth and beauty of Panis Angelicus (others just hear notes), so a human needs to allow the sense of God to be cultivated. We need to learn how to recognize the presence of God. We need to create space to pray, breathe, think, and give our minds and bodies to God.

At Virginia Theological Seminary this is our core work. So let us remind ourselves of those VTS expectations: we should start and end every day in private devotions (it needs to become a habit that
we never replace); we should participate in one act of corporate worship a day; and we need to find a Spiritual Director who keeps us accountable and demands that this must be the priority.

But more, at Virginia Theological Seminary, we recognize we live in a noisy world. A world where we are constantly surrounded by sound – a TV, the phone in our ears, conversation. So we invite you into the world of silence – just for three days during the academic year. A day when we seek to live with the silence, where we pray, and listen, where we resist conversation and noise. We go somewhere where perhaps you have never been before – a silence that surrounds and encompasses.

Understand this, we are not going to start policing at Virginia Theological Seminary. Sure we could get folks to sign into their daily act of corporate worship; sure we could track down those who just turn the Quiet Day into another vacation day of relaxation and fun. But we will not do this. For this is the invitation of love. The invitation isn’t from the Seminary, it is from the God we worship. God wants this time with you; you need this time with God. We all need to give God the space so we work on that relationship with God; so we too become lives in which others can recognize the presence of God.

Bringing this together: the poet Hafiz puts it so beautifully:

What is the difference
Between your experience of Existence
And that of a saint?

The saint knows
That the spiritual path
Is a sublime chess game with God

And that the Beloved
Has just made such a Fantastic Move

That the saint is now continually
Tripping over Joy
And bursting out in Laughter
And saying, “I surrender!”
Whereas, my dear,

I am afraid you still think

Your have a thousand serious moves