

New Kilpatrick

Sermon

23rd February 2020

Matthew 17:1-9

Spirit... may we find a deeper way to meet you... may we let go the words... and find that place... deeper than sound... where we can breathe again... more freely... more honestly... and perceive the thinness of the world... and the closeness of heaven... So be it... Amen

Kilchoman beach on Islay... The road of the kings on Iona... sitting in the seat behind the communion table just as people arrive on a Sunday and not being noticed... lying on your back at the top of Berwick Law, looking at the world upside down... sitting in our house, mug of tea in hand, watching the rain throw itself at the window... some of my... 'thin' places... where you feel the membrane of the world is as fine as tissue... and you move out of yourself a little... perceive the world in a richer way... a different energy... beauty...

We all have our own list of thin places... and I invite you this morning to remind yourselves of them... those places... or moments... or times... where we are free of being pawns in some game... chasing our tails for some institution... bent with the weight of our worries...

Those liberating places that are all too rare for us to appreciate... yet vital for the sake of our emotional wellbeing and spiritual health...

So this morning... let us make time to contemplate them... Let us lay aside the stuff of religion... the learning and doctrine... the beliefs we imagine we have to hold to... and take ourselves to those transfiguration points... those thin places... that speak more to us than any sermon can...

And I'm happy to leave you there... in our imaginations... those places where we perceive and revere the wonder... the energy... the infinite contrast of life... It is possibly the most valuable thing we can offer in worship...

Which is somewhat an irony... given religion is a valuable carrier of the stories and rituals we use to find meaning... but for some reason... it feels that very religion... is allowed to choke out the breath of that which is mystical... more deeply spiritual...

We keep focussing our spiritual life at the level of devotion... squeezing our spirituality into prayer... limited because we don't know what to say... I was taught the first prayer is adoration then confession... then thanksgiving and intercession... however that that is not the pattern we experience here...

We engage with God... firstly in silence... stilling ourselves as a community... as the symbol of life... the word... is placed here and we symbolically gather round it...

The first formal prayer has become not one that seeks adoration or confession... These things are there if we listen... but it is a prayer... a space in our time together... to contemplate... to find the silences... and recognise these are deeper than the words... and the words themselves are poetry... that they may be understood in different ways... poetry being the language of faith...

We have institutionalised our spirituality... It becomes something that is done to us... and we lose the freedom... the adventure... those thin places invite... that take us beyond our imagined rules of religion... and see deeper into love and God...

In the echo of transfiguration... might we hear this story... not as a piece of faith history... or even a metaphor... but an invitation... to bring back to the centre of all we do... a contemplative life and mystical faith... that pushes the edges back a little... that seeks to see beyond where our corporate and institutional lives let us go...

We might be tempted to focus on the transfiguration of Jesus as some kind of authentication of his unique relationship with God... and perhaps that is so... but might we also allow ourselves... that deeper part of ourselves... that actually wants more from our faith than proof texts of who we believe Jesus is... that the transfiguration is a recognition that we have it within us rather than the institution... to see the whole earth reveals God's glory...

William Blake in his Marriage of Heaven and Hell writes... and his words are caught his culture and time... "If the doors of perception... were cleansed... everything would appear to man as it is... infinite... For man has closed himself up... till he sees all things through narrow chinks of his cavern"...

Might we let the image of the transfiguration... that moment when the disciples... and perhaps Jesus himself... saw beyond the everyday... push the limits of our imaginations... and sense of possibility... in our spirituality...

We might be happy in our rational world... where everything has an explanation... to hear the story... simply as the poetics of an ancient world view... but whose testimony is essentially untrustworthy for our rational ears...

Or... perhaps... we might chose... *not*... to lose the wonder... and hear it as one of many examples in our faith... along with other faiths... that recognise... there are deeper dimensions in the world... thin places... of transformation and resurrection that emerge in ordinary places... and makes them... for us... extraordinary...

Might we not be scared to say so... that our faith is not a book of beliefs to agree to... but a way of seeing the world... its value and its beauty and its energy...

Might we understand... our faith is an invitation... to lift the veil and see the world as lively, transformative, energetic, and spiritually-charged... as the writer Bruce Epperly describes...

We would be doing well... would we not... to make such a place as this... shaped round such imagination and possibility... and of course it *is* that in many ways... but to invite that more... to shift our institution towards being a place of spiritual intelligence... shaped by the poetry of the faith... a community that invites transfiguration... seeing the worth... and depth... of our spiritual journey... that sees the world charged with the presence of God...

There is much evidence that congregations who are engaged with social justice... who affirm those who the rest of our society see as less worthy... who respond to refugees and homeless... often find it difficult to marry activism with contemplation... Yet might this be that very connecting place... between Jesus on the mountain... and the valley of Lent we enter next week... that crossover place... where transfiguration is possible...

For this is not just a place where we can be rescued from sin or violence or fear... but a sacred place that is lively, transformative, energetic, and spiritually-charged... Such places... thin places in

our community... would be our greatest gift and resource for changing this world's centuries old trajectory of violence and fear...

Over Lent we offer a space to learn and engage with mindfulness... a place to centre ourselves differently in life and faith... Jeanette will be leading that...

But for now... perhaps... might we write our thin places... on the cards in the pews... and collect them together... to share this sacred world we inhabit... with each other... at these deeper levels... connect with each other in these thin places... and know the spiritual value of them... transfigured places where as Elizabeth Barrett Browning describes... "Earth's crammed with heaven, And every common bush afire with God; But only he who sees, takes off his shoes"...