



Eglise du Sacré-Coeur, Oppède

Sermon

Sunday, 8th March 2020

Second Sunday of Lent

Year A: Genesis 12.1-4a; Romans 4.1-5, 13-17; John 3.1-17

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

I wonder if any of you have ever been to Iona, the island off the west coast of Scotland where St Columba first brought the Christian faith from Ireland in the sixth century. It's the site of a medieval abbey which by the early 20th century had fallen into ruin. In the 1930s, George Macleod, a Church of Scotland minister working in a poor district of Glasgow, had the idea of rebuilding Iona Abbey, offering activity to people from the city who were unemployed, working alongside students and other volunteers. The movement became the Iona Community, now an international ecumenical body.

The island is a beautiful place, with an atmosphere that's special. It has both an ancient sense of the sacred and a modern, radical ethic. It offers both deep peace and a sense of challenge. George Macleod called Iona a 'thin' place, where the division between the spiritual and the material, the things of heaven and earth, feels very thin.

I have a particular affection for Iona, for I went there around fifteen years ago when my sense of vocation to be ordained was becoming increasingly insistent and I needed time and space to decide whether or not to approach the church



about it. I took the journey from London, and having set off before dawn arrived in the evening to find there was a late-night Eucharist in the Abbey. I walked in, giving thanks for the fact that I now had four uninterrupted days to think about vocation, weighing up the pros and cons of taking a step that might result in a radical alteration to my life. The service was beautiful and still, the thinness of the place tangible. When the time came to go up for Communion, I waited for a space at the altar rail, whereupon a man got up from it, turned round and walked towards me. He was wearing a Nike sweatshirt. In that moment I saw the answer I had travelled so far to find, and I didn't have to wait four days. The shirt said: 'Just do it.'

The symbol of the Iona Community is a wild goose, which is how the ancient Celts saw the Holy Spirit. It's a contrast to the more tranquil dove usually found in Christian symbolism. The Celts perceived how the Holy Spirit has a tendency to disrupt and surprise, moving our lives in unexpected ways like the actions of a wild goose. Those actions are not unlike the characteristics of the Spirit to which Jesus refers in our Gospel reading this morning: 'It blows where it chooses.'

In our reading we encounter Nicodemus, a Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, the highest governing religious body. He comes to Jesus by night, as he is fearful about being seen with him. Yet there is something about the teacher from Nazareth that attracts him. The older man wants to understand his teaching, but he is held back by his own traditional and literalist thinking. John's reference to 'night' is not just about secrecy. In his Gospel there is constant interplay between light and darkness. Night, for the writer, is the place of confusion and doubt. Jesus talks to Nicodemus almost playfully, teasing him into broadening and deepening his understanding: 'Are you a teacher and don't understand these things?' Jesus also plays on the double meaning of a word that in both Greek and



Hebrew means ‘wind’ as well as ‘spirit’. He encourages Nicodemus to see that an encounter with the Spirit of God is life enhancing, unpredictable, exhilarating.

There’s another play on words when Jesus refers to being born ‘from above’. The phrase in Greek can also mean being born ‘again’. Nicodemus lights on the second meaning: ‘How can anyone be born after having grown old?’ But Jesus refers to the other meaning, ‘from above’. This highlights another pair of contrasts in John’s Gospel, between earthly and heavenly things. We are being shown that if we become open to the creative power of the Spirit of God, everything changes. It is mysterious – like the wind, we don’t know where it comes from. Yet most of us can recall moments in our lives when we have experienced a sense of something heavenly, of transcendence – a sense that there is a dimension to existence of which we are not often aware but which, when we encounter it, feels like something we can trust. The poet Wordsworth called it:

‘A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.’¹

John’s Gospel assures us that to be ‘born of the Spirit’ is to receive God’s gift of eternal life, not just beyond death but a transformed mode of life now – life in the dimension of the eternal. Paul, in his Letter to the Galatians, refers to the gifts of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness,

¹ *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*



gentleness, and self-control.² These are what follow, and what others can experience in their dealings with us, if we allow the Spirit to work within us.

The reference to being born of ‘water and Spirit’ is a reference to Baptism, to which members of the community for whom John was writing would come after beginning their journey of faith. For our response to the Spirit of God, says John, is faith.

Nicodemus is still in the dark. Doubt is necessary for faith to grow, but sometimes it can immobilise us. Christ calls us to step from doubt into belief – from darkness to light - accepting his word and receiving his Spirit. As he puts it: ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.’ The unconditional love of God is for the world – inclusive, for all - a wild goose of an experience that changes everything. And faith is our response to it.

Nicodemus often gets a bad press, as John deliberately contrasts his cautious approach by night with Jesus’s next encounter, which takes place in broad daylight. (This is with the woman at the well - a Samaritan, with no religious credentials. In contrast to the religious leader, she immediately testifies of Jesus.) Yet we must not condemn Nicodemus, because he appears twice more in John’s account: once in the Council, defending Jesus’s right to a fair hearing, and once near the end, when he and Joseph of Arimathea come to prepare Jesus’s body for burial. So perhaps his journey, which began in darkness and doubt, does after all end in faith. Like the writer of the Gospel, he has seen the *logos*, the creative power of God, which was in the beginning and through which all things came into being, made flesh in Jesus Christ.

² Galatians 5.22-23



Some of us are gathering in small groups during Lent to study the Beatitudes, the sayings of Jesus which appear at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. We are discovering how revolutionary they are. As baptised Christians, born of water and the Spirit, we are called to live out the Beatitudes - to hunger and thirst for justice, to be merciful, to be compassionate, and to live life as a gift. It can be liberating, freeing us from self-absorption, turning us outwards so that we are freed to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and our neighbours as ourselves. That is why fishermen left their nets on the beach for this extraordinary teacher. For he placed before them a vision of freedom that is nothing less than the kingdom of God.

It's a good vision to hold onto in these troubled times, when we are having to learn to live more provisionally because of the coronavirus epidemic. We cannot plan or control things in the way we would like, for we do not know what we will be allowed to do in a few weeks' time. But we do have choices. God in Christ gives us freedom, and that raises the question how we are to respond to things like this. With fearfulness? Or with courage, compassion, generosity and love? Perhaps, as Jesus teaches us, we should learn to allow the wind of the Spirit to blow where it chooses, praying that we may receive and share its fruits. Follow the wild goose in all its unpredictability, trusting in the Word made flesh who lived among us, and in the one he called *Abba*, Father. Trusting in the Trinity of Love who is the source of everything, the one God who is above us, beside us and within us, and who will never let us go.

One more thing about Iona. Some years after my visit I discovered that it's also a word in Hebrew (*Jonah*) which means ... a dove. It is a place where the Spirit



of God can be felt. I recommend you go there. You never know what might happen.

Amen.