

Sermon Pastor Woldemar Flake, Hannover

Hannover International Worship, August 19<sup>th</sup> 2018

Text: Matthew 17, 1 - 13

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ

- It must have been Rev. John Priestly whom I heard speak about the concept of “thin places” for the first time.
  - Impressive man and preacher he was
  - While some may say he had a beard like Dumbledore, I would reply: No, Dumbledore had a beard a lot like John...
  - Red cassock of a chaplain to the queen, white surplice, slim figure, the long white beard, lots of charisma, great sense of humour: My, that dignified priest looked like a Celtic Saint indeed...
  - If it had not been he, John Priestly, who had hinted at this idea of the thin place but an over-enthusiastic devotee of Celtic spirituality, I probably would have binned that thought from the start as mere theologically pretentious kitsch.
  - John Priestly spoke with authority though.
  - A thin place, this is what you will commonly get as a definition, is a place where the boundary between heaven and earth is especially thin. It's a place where we feel that actually God is not distant from us.
  - God's realm surrounds our world, and sometimes we may get just a glimpse of this world that remains hidden from our senses. The metaphor Thin Place is based on a worldview in which heaven and earth are separated. But some places on earth seem to be thin in the sense that the separation between heaven and earth is narrowed, the boundary becomes translucent. Thus, people find it easier to sense God's presence in these so-called thin places.
  - One place that many people who went there would typically describe as a thin place is the island of Iona in Scotland where a Christian community runs the ancient Abbey as a house for guests and pilgrims. And it is true: If you stay at the Iona Community for a week you will probably experience your faith in unexpected ways.
  - When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.” Jacob got a glimpse of God's realm at the gate of heaven and called the place the House of God, Beth El.
  
  - Back in 1998 John Priestly had taken our group of curates on a walk up Pendle Hill in East Lancashire. He was a keen walker. Close to nature. The Celtic type of a priest.
  - It came as a severe blow to him when after a stroke he needed considerable time to recover before he could preach and walk again.
  - A few years later he and his wife went on a hike in the Dales. At a spot where John always had felt that this was a “thin place” for him, on a narrow path along a steep precipice his wife walked 20 or 30 yards ahead of him. She heard John make a deep sigh in view of the beauty of God's creation.
  - When she turned around, he had disappeared. He had fallen down the hill and died at the spot, died at his thin place as she told us afterwards. He died at the place where he had felt close to God, where he had experienced God's presence many times before.
  - It was suspected that he had not slipped but had suffered another severe apoplexy.
  - Had John Priestly been closer to God at this place than anywhere else? What if he had died driving a car on the motorway? Would God not have been just as close then?

- You see, theology has taught us to be wary of enthusiastic expressions of faith, even opposed to experience as a dimension of a living faith. Experience, we have learned, is not the direct route to God. Experience can mislead us. Whatever experience is, we will not experience God, for he is The Other. God dwells in this world in one house only, and that is his son, Jesus Christ. Christ is the thin place where God's world and the world of creation meet.
- I remember that I have been asked once: "Where and when have you experienced God?" This question caused disconcertment in me.
  - I do not think that I ever have experienced God.
  - I have experienced joy when for the first time it dawned on me that God loves me, the person I am, personally.
  - I have experienced anger with God when people tragically died who I did not want to.
  - I have experienced satisfaction when things came together and I discovered a beautiful theological thought.
  - I have experienced excitement, when sharing a well-known text of the bible with a stranger the words suddenly began to open up to me in unexpected ways.
  - I have experienced calm and comfort in worship when the music let me forget to look at my watch, when during Eucharist I realized that somehow through an invisible bridge I am connected with my parents who died years ago and to my children who are sitting with me in the pew or are kneeling at the altar-rails.
  - I know that God is here, but I do not think that I have ever experienced God in the sense of a worldly experience.
  - God never spoke to me: "Woldemar, you have a strange first name for a Christian, but nevertheless let me tell you this and that..."
- Christians today feel a deep desire for experience:
  - In Pentecostal churches e.g. emotions usually are expressed in a far more direct way than in the mainline churches. Many of these churches flourish.
  - My wife and I have just returned from a study trip to Jerusalem. We saw Christians from all over the world visiting the sacred places of Jesus' death and resurrection. What else are we seeking as pilgrims than some sort of a tenable experience with our faith?
  - And, yes, we also try to find fresh expressions of faith and church here at home, expressions that will appeal to the minds and the hearts and the bodies of women and men.
- But will this ever be experience with "the other", will it ever transcend our human sphere?
- The transfiguration of Christ on the mountain. We heard about it in the Gospel reading.
  - This dramatic event marks a major turning point in the gospel narratives, for Jesus is beginning to turn to Jerusalem and to the suffering and death that awaits him there. But before all of that there is this glimpse of glory. The revelation of Christ's glory in this chapter is a clear confirmation of the truth of Peter's earlier confession in chapter 16, where Peter said to Jesus: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." (16:16)
  - We may once in a while have these mountain experiences: The sudden realization that our faith is not just an imaginary world. The sudden revelation that we live surrounded by the great cloud of witnesses that is mentioned in Hebrews 12, that God is very much alive and we are part of his people, that we are connected through Christ with fellow Christians from all over the world and throughout the ages. And this may even occur to us on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem.
  - We have to live in the plains of everyday life though. We have to climb down from these mountains of transfiguration, they will not be places where we are granted permanent right of abode.

- Eberhard Jüngel once said this about the relation of faith and experience:
  - “Faith is distinguished from worldly experience by being a very specific form of experience, ***faith is the experience with the act of experiencing.***”
  - This seemingly complex formula resonates with what I would like to say about the concept of the “thin place”. A thin place leads us to the experience with the act of experiencing.
- Today’s readings were picked slightly randomly, I wanted to point out one common aspect:
  - Beth El, the place where Jacob is met by God,
  - The Mount of transfiguration
  - We could add more biblical “locations”, where Man seeks God and God meets Man: Moses at the burning bush or at Mount Sinai, the Holy of Holies in the Temple...
  - There seems to be the clear notion that some places are nearer to God than others and that these places despite their holiness are “thin” at the same time.
  - This idea that certain physical places are holier than others is being criticised by Jesus though. In John 4 Jesus encounters a woman in Samaria. Jews believed that God was most present in the Temple in Jerusalem. Samaritans favored Mt. Garizim as their holy place. When the woman mentions this controversy, Jesus responds: “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” (John 4:21-24)
  - This passage can be interpreted this way: It does not matter how holy a place is when we encounter God. What does matter is our openness to God’s spirit. If ***faith is the experience with the act of experiencing*** that means that any moment, any place can become a thin place for us.
  - In other words: We may not be able to draw a physical map of thin places. But through faith God’s Holy Spirit can teach us to become more aware how closely connected his realm is with our empiric world.
- These thin moments are contingent – you will not force them to come along or to stay around. But there are these moments when we sense this other dimension that surrounds us.
  - We are touched by beautiful music, by an animal looking in our eyes. What does this creature see in me?
  - We may or may not be touched by a religious act, by the fellowship we share.
  - Out of town, at sea, or under a North Yorkshire sky - close to nature – I may feel closer to God.
  - But in fact I am not! “God is not far from any of us!” It does not matter what I feel.
- It do not have to be the great and beautiful things that lead us into a moment where we realize: This other dimension, it is there always.
  - E.g. we may be in our routine of shopping in a supermarket. Suddenly our eyes meet the eyes of another person who tries to pick up the same item from the shelf and instead of quickly looking away once in a while we smile at each other. For a split second there is an understanding that has not been there before and as we continue our shopping we keep this beautiful smile for a while.
  - We may not be sensitive enough to realize that there always is this other dimension. We can call it God’s world, or his Kingdom. But wherever it may be and whenever God’s Kingdom of Justice and Peace will be fully visible – it is here already.
- The bad news is: “Thin moments” will pass – you will not put them into a shrine. But the good news is: “God is not far from any one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being.”

- On Iona the morning at the Community starts with worship in the abbey. The service does not end with a blessing: It continues throughout the day.
  - Everything you do is divine service: You will have your chores, maybe cleaning the toilets, sweeping the floors. You will have time in conversation, you will be outdoors walking to the beach, you will have time on your own.
  - Everything – that is what the Iona Community wants to teach us –is divine service, everything is happening in God’s presence. In him we live and move and have our being. The whole day is part of the service and only at the night prayer you will be sent to bed with a blessing.
  - One of the things I have learned about the Celtic Saints is that prayer accompanies everything. There are old prayers about everyday activities: Opening a gate, milking the cows. Prayer brings us into a relation with the living God. It will require some practice. But it even works in Hannover: A prayer for waiting at the traffic lights. A prayer when you hear an ambulance racing somewhere.
  - Whatever you encounter throughout your day: You can always look at it in both ways: As a worldly experience alone or as an experience in the light of God’s relation to us. Living faith as experience with the act of experiencing.
- We are waiting for God’s new world, living the tension of the “Now” of God’s Kingdom and the “Not Yet” of fulfilment.
    - Our task today probably is: Re-discover God in the “Now” and the “Not Yet”, discover his miracles in our daily lives, slow down to allow these simple thin moments to occur to us.

### ***Miracles - by Walt Whitman***

*Why! who makes much of a miracle?  
 As to me, I know of nothing else but miracles,  
 Whether I walk the streets of Manhattan,  
 Or dart my sight over the roofs of houses toward the sky,  
 Or wade with naked feet along the beach, just in the edge of the  
 water,  
 Or stand under trees in the woods,  
 Or talk by day with any one I love--or sleep in the bed at night with  
 any one I love,  
 Or sit at table at dinner with my mother,  
 Or look at strangers opposite me riding in the car,  
 Or watch honey-bees busy around the hive, of a summer forenoon,  
 Or animals feeding in the fields,  
 Or birds--or the wonderfulness of insects in the air,  
 Or the wonderfulness of the sun-down--or of stars shining so quiet  
 and bright,  
 Or the exquisite, delicate, thin curve of the new moon in spring;  
 Or whether I go among those I like best, and that like me best--  
 mechanics, boatmen, farmers,  
 Or stand a long while looking at the movements of machinery,  
 Or behold children at their sports,  
 Or the admirable sight of the perfect old man, or the perfect old  
 woman,  
 Or the sick in hospitals, or the dead carried to burial,  
 Or my own eyes and figure in the glass;*

*These, with the rest, one and all, are to me miracles,  
The whole referring--yet each distinct, and in its place.*

*To me, every hour of the light and dark is a miracle,  
Every cubic inch of space is a miracle,  
Every square yard of the surface of the earth is spread with the  
same,  
Every foot of the interior swarms with the same;  
Every spear of grass--the frames, limbs, organs, of men and women,  
and all that concerns them,  
All these to me are unspeakably perfect miracles.*

*To me the sea is a continual miracle;  
The fishes that swim--the rocks--the motion of the waves--the ships,  
with men in them,  
What stranger miracles are there?*

***And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your  
minds in Christ Jesus. Amen***