

18th June 2023, 2nd Sunday after Trinity, (Proper 6)

Exodus 19: 2-8a; Psalm 100; Romans 5:1-8; Matthew 9:35-10:8

About a month ago, I set out with my sister to walk the Ridgeway from Avebury stone circle in Wiltshire to Ivinghoe Beacon in Buckinghamshire, 87 miles in 9 days. Sadly, after 60 miles, my right knee announced loud and clear “Not one step further”. I had to withdraw and travel the last 2 days to each overnight pub along with our baggage in the pre-booked taxi, once sharing the space with a very ill-looking exhaust system being dropped off in the less salubrious parts of Tring. I was still able to meet up with my sister each evening and toast her success in the course of some very good meals. Despite my somewhat agonising knee, it was a wonderful experience in every way, for which I am profoundly thankful. Psalm 100 bids us “be joyful” and I was; I am, whenever I think of those days just a few weeks ago.

One of the attractions of the Ridgeway is that it can challenge you to see a really “big picture”. There is the historical picture that takes us back, right back for millennia. Starting at Avebury means that you are immediately transported into another world where people dug 9 metre deep ditches using antlers as tools, and marked out their sacred spaces with huge sarsen stones. Early one morning in May we set out along the stone avenue, becoming time-travellers. There’s an awareness of treading where others have trodden – something that I’ve often felt in this cathedral church, and which has always mattered to me. The old drovers’ road that is the Ridgeway stretches back 5000 years, and at times, entirely on our own, no human habitation in sight, only the sound of the skylarks, you could feel the timelessness. We were out of the here and now, aware of the vastness of the chronology and of how microscopic we and our life spans are in comparison.

I hope it's not too fanciful if I say that parts of the Old Testament and especially the Pentateuch, can have the same kind of effect on me. Reading about Moses in the wilderness at the foot of Mount Sinai is like entering another world, a world that is unbelievably remote from anything in our world today. There is a timeline stretching back from us here today all the way to the vastness of the desert where everything began for the Judaeo/Christian faiths. Today's OT reading gives us a kind of embryonic covenant. God says, "If you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples." And finally we are told that the people all answered as one, "Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do." It's a kind of warm-up event for chapter 20 when God gives Moses the 10 commandments, spelling out exactly how the people must obey God's voice in duty to God and to each other. That 2-way covenant lies at the heart of the relationship between God and his people. The people must never lose sight of what God has done for them and continues to do for them. Humbly obedient thanksgiving is the natural response to an awareness of God's gifts – gifts that are way more than they or we deserve.

It's the matter of undeserved gifts that concerns St Paul in today's epistle. We are entirely undeserving. It's easy to look back at the Israelites in the desert and be quite critical. In previous chapters they have moaned at Moses fairly consistently like spoilt children. No water, no food; why have you brought us to this awful place? It would be better to be back in Egypt... They had already forgotten the gross injustices and cruelties of slavery from which they had been rescued. They don't deserve God's protection, care and love. Reasoning in that way is all too easy and criticising other people is all too attractive an option. We may be on a timeline of several thousand years, but sadly, humans have not changed very much. We still are undeserving, and we still blame everyone but ourselves. It's not only the prerogative of ex-prime ministers and ex-presidents...

There was one little verse in all of today's words that leapt out at me: verse 2 of Psalm 100: "Be ye sure that the Lord he is God: it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves; we are his people and the sheep of his pasture" – most particularly "it is he that hath made us and not we ourselves." If we had made ourselves, the boasting of which St Paul speaks would be all about our achievements, all the things we have done. But if God has made us, all that arrogant boasting is swept away at a stroke, and we boast instead of all that God has done for us despite our unworthiness. Christ has mended that original covenant. Christ has brought us back to God. We could not possibly do it for ourselves. God in Christ had to intervene and achieve reconciliation. By denying our part in our creation – "it is he that hath made us and not we ourselves" – we emphasise our reliance on God as sheep rely on their shepherd. It cuts us down to size.

As did the vast landscape through which I walked a month ago, a geographical picture as well as a historical one. First there were rolling downlands from the top of which stretched pastureland, sheep in the distance, as far as the eye could see, and then the Vale of the White Horse, apparently going on forever with huge blue skies above. And later, as we followed Grim's Ditch we passed through acres and acres of beech woods. Truly it is a landscape that geographically emphasises one's insignificance. We were shot through with a sense of the numinous, the awareness of transcendence, of that which is beyond the here and now, that to which we reach out from our miniature lives. The long barrow that is Wayland's Smithy is a magical place. We arrived there at about 4.30 in the afternoon, not another soul, not a sound but birdsong and the unmistakable whisper of beech leaves from the trees that surround the barrow like the walls of a cathedral. It's a place that inspires reverence, a place to remember the lives of those who have gone before us, and although not remotely Christian, a place to remember that great cloud of witnesses. Quite simply, it's

a place of beauty that inspires wonder beyond words, that puts us in our place, tiny specks in the scheme of things; and as St Paul reminds us, Christ died for these tiny undeserving specks, he died for us all – the ungodly, the sinner.

The gospel shows us Jesus preaching the imminence of the kingdom, the good news of the kingdom. When I was training for the ministry, we had the good fortune to receive our teaching on the gospels from John Fenton. He made everything so simple! When it came to the kingdom, he drew a vertical line down the middle of the blackboard, and on the left hand side he wrote a list itemised one above the other – disease, pride, violence and war, persecution, misery, starvation, poverty, cruelty, hatred, all the negatives of the age in which we live, the world as we all too often see it. And on the right hand side of his line he wrote their opposites – health and wholeness, humility, peace, justice, joy, nutrition, wealth, compassion, and love. That right hand column represents the kingdom, which is not a place where, but a time when. When we recognize health, humility, peace, compassion, love etc as flourishing, we are in God's kingdom. So it is a present possibility. But at the same time it is a hope for the future, something towards which we are all travelling. Because we shall never in this life eliminate all the evils of the left hand column and only experience the joys of the right hand column. Full realisation of the kingdom will need that vertical line to come into play – the Day of the Lord, the end of time. But the kingdom is still our hope. Jesus preached the good news of the kingdom and told his disciples to do the same. We too must preach that good news. But preaching is no good without supporting actions that bring the kingdom to life in glimpses of hope. So the disciples were told to perform signs which gave evidence of the nearness of the kingdom. They must cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers and cast out demons.

I thought of those 12 ill-assorted men being sent out in terms of my own entirely sheltered walk. We knew exactly where we were going, at which pub we would spend each night. All we had to do was put one foot in front of the other and soak up the beauties of the environment. Childsplay compared with the apostolic experience which demanded faith and courage. They had no idea where they were going or where they might sleep at night or where the next meal might come from, and money didn't come into it: "you received without payment; give without payment." Public speaking, proclaiming the kingdom, probably did not loom large in the life experience of the average fisherman, and as for all that healing.... I'm sure it was an enormous struggle, at least in the first instance. The disciples nevertheless must make the kingdom a reality.

And so must we. Not in blaming and moaning like the Israelites. The far from perfect world we mostly take for granted needs to be challenged, not in a spirit of blame and criticism, but by demonstrating the kingdom's alternatives in the way we live our lives and turn the accepted order upside down. Tomorrow marks the beginning of Refugee Week, a celebration of different creativities but within the overall theme of compassion: maybe a good place for our kingdom to start.

R S Thomas wrote a beautiful short poem entitled "The Kingdom".

It's a long way off but inside it
There are quite different things going on:
Festivals at which the poor man
Is king and the consumptive is
Healed: mirrors in which the blind look

At themselves and love looks at them
Back; and industry is for mending
The bent bones and the minds fractured
By life. It's a long way off, but to get
There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you will purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf.

“Your faith, green as a leaf.” There is my image for today. God’s kingdom flourishes mysteriously, symbolised by all those beech trees through which I walked, trees whose shimmering, whispering green May-time leaves represent faith in all its fragility; faith in the inherent goodness of the world as it was created and faith in an all-loving creator God who has rescued us so that we might live out lives that reflect his self-giving love in the glory of his kingdom.

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