

THE EXTRA-ORDINARY ORDINARY

Sermon preached at 10.00am Sung Eucharist
St. Edmundsbury Cathedral
Sunday 10 February 2019

A few years ago, a large group of children visited Ely Cathedral. It was a school trip from Harlow – a place very different to Ely. After the train ride, the 400 or so children walked in procession up to the Cathedral, enormous and grand before them. All the children had posies of flowers and the plan was to lay them at the shrine of Etheldreda. When they entered the Cathedral, the organ was playing and just at the point the organist was giving it full whack. The children looked up in awe at the vast, stunning interior. Their mouths dropped open in amazement. They were stopped in their tracks. And their teachers found it very difficult to move them on with their flowers.

“In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him ... And one called to another and said: ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.’ The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called”¹

Isaiah’s vision, children gob-smacked in a Cathedral, moments that take your breath away, these kinds of experience have been called a “spiritual ambush”. Unexpected spiritual experiences that catch us unawares, when the spiritual reality which we forget so often breaks into our consciousness and knocks us sideways. What experiences have you had like that?

There’s something similar happening in this morning’s Gospel reading. Fishermen knackered after a whole night fishing, fed up for catching nothing. Jesus persuades them to put their nets out again and the fish caught are so many that nets start to break and boats start to sink. They “were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken”. So amazed that “When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him”². Sometimes a break-taking experience is life-changing. Peak experiences, life-changing experiences are extra-ordinary of course. They can change your perception for ever.

William Blake, the poet, painter and mystic, was once asked about watching a sunset. “Mr Blake, don’t you see a ball of burn gassing in the sky about the size of a guinea?” “No!” replied Blake. “I see the whole company of heaven crying ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts’”.

For Blake, this was not an extra-ordinary, life-changing experience. It was an everyday, ordinary experience because for Blake, the ordinary was extra-ordinary. For Blake, “the whole earth is full of God’s glory.” That can be true for us too, if we will but open our eyes.

Did you get up in the early morning to view the blood wolf moon a couple of weeks ago? I was up for a pee in the early hours so I stayed up to watch. The shadow of the earth gradually covered the bright white of the moon, leaving a dim brown red disc in the sky, ethereal and mysterious. An extra-ordinary occurrence that reminds us that every night the moon gets up, beams at us as it journeys across the night sky – if we will but notice.

Last week, snowdrops were planted in the Abbey Gardens during the annual Holocaust Memorial Day Service. Children planting snowdrops in that setting reminds us how snowdrops are signs of life at a dark time of year, symbols of hope in our troubled world. And every day at this time of year the snowdrops wave at us in our gardens, in the Great Churchyard, in parks - astonishingly delicate and intricate, different sizes and shapes of white – if we will but notice.

¹ Isaiah 6.1-2

² Luke 5.11

Last summer, we were staying by a river during our holiday. Kate and I were up enjoying the morning sunshine, when two kingfishers flashed out of a bushy tree. Their brilliant turquoise and orange, small bodies and long beaks unmistakable. One disappeared very quickly. The other flew past me and landed on the rowing boat a couple of meters from Kate. There it rested for a short while. Then it zipped back in front of me back to the tree, visible in flight for several seconds.

Later I looked up Ann Lewin's well known poem that compares prayer to seeing a kingfisher.

"Prayer is like watching for
The kingfisher. All you can do is
Be there where he is like to appear, and
Wait.
Often nothing much happens;
...
But when you've almost stopped
Expecting it, a flash of brightness
Gives encouragement."

Prayer can be like that – for us who are so preoccupied with day to day concerns, for us so caught up with the minutiae of our lives. Prayer can be like that, but there is another dimension that our busyness and obsessions obscure.

Shortly we will turn our attention to the altar for Communion. Joe will lead us singing the ancient words "Lift up your hearts; we lift them to the Lord", "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God; it is right to give thanks God thanks and praise". These short words remind us of the heart of the spiritual life: gratitude and praise for the blessings all around us. Not just the occasional kingfisher or even the seasonal snow drops. The every-night moon, the every day sun and sky and clouds. The miracle of each person. The beauty of the rain drops in puddles this morning, or droplets on the blades of grass. This is an attitude, a view of life that we can cultivate – if we can open our eyes. It is a form of conversion that is life-changing.

A few weeks ago, the BBC's recent adaptation of War & Peace was available again on iPlayer. Its glorious television. Tolstoy's great story of Russian society life and Napoleon's invasion of Russia. In the midst of the misery of the French occupation of Moscow, one of the wealthy leading characters, Pierre Bezukhov, is taken prisoner. He meets a humble, ordinary man with an extraordinary approach to life. Despite their grim imprisonment, the ordinary man teaches Pierre about gratitude and generosity. He shares his cold backed potato. Pierre is about to gobble it down, when the ordinary man says, "Wait! It's better with a sprinkle of salt." Salt added, the potato is the most delicious food Pierre has ever eaten.

Months later, Napoleon and his forces have abandoned Moscow and retreated. Pierre is restored to his wealthy lifestyle. He sits down to a sumptuous meal and is about to dive in when he remembers what the ordinary man had taught him. Taking one potato, he sprinkles some salt and slowly savours the flavour.

Dear Friends, life is precious. Life is short. The gifts and miracles are all around us. The issues that occupy your mind today will be different this time next week and changed completely this time next year. Don't let them stop you noticing what is all around. The ordinary is extraordinary. "The whole earth is full of God's glory". Lift up your hearts! Let us give thanks to the Lord our God!

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