

## **The Bright Field: Sermon Preached on 30<sup>th</sup> July 2023 (8<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Trinity)**

Preached at St John's, Devizes

*Readings – Romans 8: 26-39; Matthew 13: 31-33, 44-52*

*“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field ... someone ... sells all that he has and buys that field.”*

I have a photograph which I have named *The Bright Field*. It is taken from the top of Black Mountain, the highest of the chain of hills that erupts immediately to the west of Belfast, looking not towards the city, but the rich grasslands to the west. Lough Neagh, the largest lake in these islands, lies immediately behind. It was taken on a stereotypically gloomy Irish summer evening – this disappointingly dull and breezy summer in Wiltshire, with the jet stream parked further south than usual, is just like a normal summer in Belfast.



A single gap in the clouds had opened up to cast lovely golden light on a single small hill, covered in fields, a couple of miles away, while all around and behind it remained deep in shadow.

It called to mind perhaps the finest of the poems by the Welsh Anglican priest, RS Thomas, itself a surprising shaft of light amid what is otherwise a gloomy literary output. It begins:

*I have seen the sun break through  
to illuminate a small field  
for a while, and gone my way  
and forgotten it. But that was the  
pearl of great price, the one field that had  
treasure in it*

In that spirit, let me give you a little something to ponder at a time of year when many of us are about to go on holiday.

Often, when I go to church while on holiday, my irreligious friends will ask me afterwards if the service was “uplifting”, hoping to be kind and supportive, nodding and expecting an answer in the affirmative. Sometimes it was, but sometimes I tell them it wasn’t. Sometimes that was my fault, because my mind was miles away. But sometimes I tell them that the prayers were anodyne, or the worship sloppy, or the sermon insipid. And then I tell them that, even though the service wasn’t “uplifting”, I was still glad that I went.

One of the reasons I go to church when I’m away from home is to remind myself that we’re all part of something bigger – a glorious global movement full of ordinary and rather flawed people, who are just like us even when they’re very different. This reality can be easy to forget when we worship near to home Sunday by Sunday.

Yet another and more important reason is duty – such an unfashionable concept, yet without duty, we could scarcely organise society in a decent way. Thanks to preparing our confirmation candidates, I have had cause to re-engage with the Catechism of the Church of England, its official statement of doctrine aimed at laypeople. Did you even know it existed? It has a section on our duties to God and neighbour. And one of them, unsurprisingly, is to keep Sunday as a day of worship and prayer. As a layperson, I always considered it my duty to attend church every Sunday wherever I was, unless it really was impossible, and as a priest I consider myself even more bound to that duty.

Of course, there have been moments in my life when worship has transported me towards heaven, just for a few minutes. Still more often, those moments of transcendence, when shafts of divine light illuminated something in my soul, have come while praying on my own in a holy place. I wouldn't be without them; the memory of them has carried me through some very dark times in my life; but they can't be the sum total of our Christian practice.

Christianity is not a sort of spiritual Prozac, not a holy mood booster. A faith that is always smiling isn't a realistic one. Life, as we all know, has its times of dullness, and of pain, as well as times when we see fields set aflame by sunlight. If I only worship with my fellow Christians at churches which operate precisely to suit my wishes, then I am building up a faith that may not survive those times when life is inevitably operating in a way that doesn't suit my wishes.

Life has a regular grind. There are dull and repetitive tasks we need to fulfil to keep body and soul together; this is the tilling of the soil in which the more wonderful episodes of life grow. It doesn't matter whether we're keeping our home in good order or seeking glory: every Olympic gold medallist has to spend countless hours in the gym or the pool at the crack of dawn to achieve their moment of triumph. So it is with Christian worship; if we don't have a regular practice of worship and prayer, how can we experience those unpredictable bursts of transcendence?

More than that, if we take a moment to reflect on these moments, they are saying something profound about our nature. There's no evolutionary reason why we should be capable of experiencing awe, whether through prayer or through the beauty of art or nature. These experiences don't help us stay alive longer so we can reproduce the next generation.

Even setting prayer aside, our capacity to respond to beauty is a signal that we are made for more than this; that we are more than biological machines that emerged through improbable chance from some primeval soup of organic chemicals.

RS Thomas finished his meditation thus:

*Life is not hurrying  
on to a receding future, nor hankering after  
an imagined past. It is the turning  
aside like Moses to the miracle  
of the lit bush, to a brightness  
that seemed as transitory as your youth  
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.*

These moments of awe, these transitory incidents when we feel intimately connected to the whole of creation, are flashes of what awaits us in Heaven; an existence lived in the face-to-face presence of God who is love. One thing that will not be is some sort of eternal extension of a perfect day on Earth – for that would be Hell rather than Heaven. Instead, among those few strange and almost hallucinatory passages of Scripture that describe the heavenly realms, we are given a vision of our transformation into something unimaginably different, even as we remain ourselves; something no more conceivable to us now than a caterpillar could conceive of growing wings and learning to fly.

The transitory nature of these moments of transcendence teaches us something else – that we aren't in control. These things are gifts of God. That should be both a little frightening, and strangely reassuring. The deepest problems of the human race at present seem to be driven by the fact that we have developed material and intellectual power that exceeds our wisdom, triggering events that exceed humanity's capacity for control.

Indeed, we Christians struggle so much as to pray for the right things for ourselves and the world – and that's alright. As St Paul reminds us in this morning's Epistle, the Holy Spirit intercedes on our behalf, even when we're praying for the wrong things. He also reminds us that nothing can separate us from the love of God – not dull worship nor the harshness of life, neither the stupidity nor the fear nor the selfishness that afflict us all sometimes, nor war, nor environmental disaster, nor runaway technology. Nothing can separate us from the love of God.

And it is God's love for us that generates these moments of transcendence. They are divine caresses of our souls, depth calling to depth above the clamour of the world. They are intimations of what, by God's help and through God's grace, awaits us for eternity.

So be of good cheer, even on a damp, breezy, Sunday in July, and may God's love touch us all here this morning as we share God's banquet of the Eucharist.

And to God who is Love, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be all might majesty, dominion, and power, as is most justly His due, now and forevermore. Amen.