

Sunday next before Lent – 14th February 2021

It's hard to find an authentic reference to the Celtic concept 'thin places.' In fact the first reference I can find is, rather unexpectedly, from Virginia Woolf. "Is it fanciful to suppose the sky, washed into the crevices of King's College Chapel, lighter, thinner, more sparkling than the sky elsewhere?" she wrote in her novel 'Jacob's Room,' in 1921. She was moved by its Gothic architecture, the wide East Anglian sky and the sense of the intellectual ferment in the University of Cambridge. For Woolf, who was a convinced atheist, it wasn't a religious concept. Bear in mind that she didn't have a university education. Although her father, brothers and her brothers' friends had been Cambridge students, her own experience was as a 'outsider.' That perhaps sensitised her to its existence as a 'thin' place.

I wonder if it is characteristic of thin places – those places that seem to invite us into a contemplation of God – that it is easier to find them where we are visitors where we don't quite 'belong.' We can become so comfortable in our day-to-day existence that we don't recognise our need for God – or appreciate the places where we are able to experience God's presence. No one is comfortable like that at the moment, though. We have all been shaken out of our comfort zone. Perhaps one recompense of the pandemic might be the discovery of previously unrecognised thin places.

For me, I think that finding that we can communicate electronically has opened new thin places as some of us say morning prayer together, as groups of clergy from Bath deanery share thoughts and a Bible reading each morning on WhatsApp, and as Christ Church opens for private prayer every Wednesday afternoon. Slowly local people are visiting and discovering the church as a thin place. Your weekly donations enable us to keep the church clean, bright and warm. Some of you give time and thought to arranging beautiful flowers. All these individual gifts make the building welcoming and enable it to be a proxy for us, the church community. The building itself has become a thin place, demonstrating that God's desire to welcome us in, welcome us home.

To the ancient Israelites, mountain summits were 'thin places'. In his time, Christ used to go into the mountains to pray. Hills are closer to the sky which, for that less complicated age, meant nearer to God. Long before Christ, the Old Testament describes Moses climbing Mount Sinai to meet God face to face "as a man speaks to his friend," and receive the Ten Commandments. Elijah also climbed Mount Sinai and experienced God as 'thin silence' after storm and wind and earthquake. At Elijah's death he ascended again but this time accompanied by fiery chariot. Within the metaphors of the time, he was taken up into heaven.

As Virginia Woolf would have enjoyed pointing out to us, God doesn't live above the sky. But as people who inhabit bodies, our common experience is that the things of life – light, warmth and fresh air – come from above, while the things of death – cold and dark – are associated with earth. To climb higher, even just to look up, is to be nearer to light and life and God. The gothic arches of the windows in our church, like the spires of churches and cathedrals point 'up' to God.

By the time Christ invited Peter and James and John to accompany him up the mountain, the concept of worshipping God in high places was embedded in their world view. As well as Elijah and Moses, Enoch and Levi were believed to have ascended into God's presence. When Christ invited his disciples to climb to a 'high place' it would have been understandable if they had been stirred by hopes of a vision of God on his chariot throne.

But what they experienced was utterly unexpected - the revelation of Christ **himself** as God and the voice of God confirming "This is my son. Listen to him."

We can't at the moment climb mountains or visit cathedrals or even worship in our own church. The thin places, where the boundary between heaven and earth dissolve, are forbidden to us. But the condition of dislocation, of uncertainty, which afflicts us all might be a catalyst for finding our own thin place. The presence of God is strong in each of us, we just need to be aware of it to create our own thin place. We only need to find somewhere quiet and private where we can see something of God's creation – a leaf or flower or a patch of sky – and then in the quiet, be silent and wait in the presence of God.

If you find yourselves feeling self-conscious and faintly ridiculous, accept the feeling and go on waiting. Remember Peter making a fool of himself. Come back the next day and the next. The sky which washes into the crevices of Kings College Chapel is a metaphor for the Holy Spirit which will wash into the crevices of our soul.