

Sermon for Parish Communion on the 10th Sunday after Trinity (25 August 2019) - *Mike Fox*

Isaiah 58:9b-14

False and True Worship

Luke 13:10-17

Jesus Heals a Crippled Woman

I started thinking about this sermon just over a week ago when I was on holiday at Lee Abbey near Lynton in north Devon. We weren't staying in the main house, but in a one-room, self-catering cottage on the cliff top in the woods above Lee Bay called Tinkerbell; some of you may know it. It was like being on retreat with every day being holy – holy days; holiday - what's the difference?

It made me realise that this is how it should be, every moment of every day an opportunity to recognise the presence of God all around us and within us. There's a saying, attributed to St. Patrick, which goes like this: *"Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ on my right, Christ on my left, Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise, Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me, Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me, Christ in every eye that sees me, Christ in every ear that hears me."* He uses the word "Christ" because of his upbringing and tradition, but it could be any other word that calls to mind the divine and acknowledging the true support and wisdom that we can draw on in all that we do, every moment when we pause to contemplate the source of our strength, the holiness that surrounds us, the holiness that we can share with each other.



One of the things that I sometimes start the day with is a word from Richard Rohr and his friends at the Centre for Action and Contemplation. He brought me a word from the thirteenth century Meister Eckhart (1260-1328): he taught of the four fundamental principles underpinning human life. Gottfried Leibnitz later called them the Perennial Philosophy which was the theme a couple of weeks ago. Eckhart said: *"First, there is a light in the soul that is uncreated and uncreatable, a divine core that cannot be separated from God."* Saint Catherine of Genoa later said: *"My me is God: nor do I know my selfhood except in God."* There is something within us that makes us holy; we don't always pay attention to it; if we did, we may lead better lives, but it connects us moment by moment to our creator and to the source of all that is. It encourages us to join with others and worship Sunday by Sunday, times when we focus a little more on holy things, but let's experiment after this service with focussing on those holy things a bit more - let's make every day holy!

That takes us through the next two principles of Meister Eckhart, he says: *"Second, this divine essence within us can be realized. It is not an abstraction, and it need not be. It can and should be discovered, so that its presence becomes a reality in daily life."* That puts the onus on us to increase our awareness of what is truly there within us, so that we might bring it to the fore when we have need of it. So, that's not sitting in Tinkerbell

watching the wind ruffle the bushes and the rain sweep across the cliffs opposite in little flurries or the constant, bewitching sound of the surf upon the shore beneath, but rather *“going cheerfully across the world, responding to that of God in all we meet”*, as George Fox once wrote.

The third principle of Meister Eckhart is: *“This discovery of God within is life’s real and highest goal. Our supreme purpose in life is not to make a fortune, nor to pursue pleasure, nor to write our name in history, but to discover this spark of the divine that is in our hearts.”* Ted Matchett used to speak about our purpose in life being to *“make media (by which he meant this divine spark) and matter (our physical existence) meaningful in the immediate moment.”* Ted called that equation the 5M equation and thought about it as the way in which evolution really took place, this interaction between us, the physical world and God. The second course that I followed from Craig Hamilton during my sabbatical took me from my meditation stool (that was the first one) into the greater task of making this world a better place, in an evolutionary sense - that’s a much more significant role and carries me into every waking moment.

The fourth principle from Meister Eckhart is: *“when we realize this goal, or life purpose, we discover simultaneously that the divinity within ourselves is one and the same in all – all individuals, all creatures, all of life.”* It really is significant, and something we can commit to as part of our spiritual contribution to our life’s work, if that doesn’t sound too grand. We are all special and we all have a part to play in taking this world in a sensible direction.



Isaiah, in our first reading, tells us pretty much the same. If we call on him, the Lord, he will hear us. He will guide us continually; that’s what Eckhart and many other mystics highlight when they speak of this divine spark within; He is with us and can truly inspire. When we take on the needs of the world, *“our light shall rise in the darkness and our*

*gloom be like the noonday.”* Now that’s pretty special, isn’t it? If we *“call the holy day of the Lord honourable, not going our own ways, serving our own interests, or pursuing our own affairs, then we shall take delight in the Lord.”* In other words, he will support and guide us in all we do; that is, if we do not let our ego take over – that also is within, and is a potent force, distracting us from the Lord’s way if we are not vigilant.

And what does Luke invite us to do in our gospel reading? It’s another of his acted parables in which Jesus acts to heal the woman who had been crippled for eighteen years. The notable thing about this story for the Jewish leaders is that the action takes place on the sabbath. Bearing in mind that every day is to be regarded as holy and for use in cooperation with our creator, no day is better than any other for responding to genuine need. We need to keep our eyes and ears alert for how we may act, and if the situation is beyond our experience, then we may need to draw on special reserves or ask for professional help. The key is to progress in the appropriate direction.

But the leader of the synagogue was not impressed. The rules and traditions laid down over hundreds of years have established a pattern that will not be changed. Jesus rightly

points out that they all have their duties of care to look after their household including their animals. What is the difference, and why does the sabbath make these things different? Recently, more and more activities take place on a Sunday and it is getting progressively more difficult to fit things in around them; we have become very used to our particular patterns of worship here too and I wonder whether we have been a bit overbearing, rather like the leader of the synagogue in our reading today. The important thing is to listen to our inner voice, not our ego but the one we've been considering that is not separate from our maker. What is the Lord's guidance on these things?

It's interesting to compare the traditions of the religions that all recognise the patriarch Abraham, the nations that are promised to him in his great age. All of them make a point of having a day once a week when they rest from their labours: the Moslems use Friday as a special day of prayer, though they also have a regular pattern through the week too; the Jews continue to include the night as a part of the day, so their sabbath runs from just before sunset on Friday until the same time on Saturday; the Christian tradition uses Sunday and this has gradually been liberated as society has become more secular. They all derive their emphasis from that first story of creation in Genesis when God speaks our universe into being over a period of six days and rests on the seventh.

There's an interesting reflection on the eighth and subsequent days written by John Bell as he explores what humanity has done thereafter: so many things to answer for, climate change being one of them. If we think of the last few decades, we can't really rest until we have secured a severe reduction in our impact on our precious and fragile environment; the recovery has to be established within the next decade, or two at the most. Greta Thunberg and others are heading off for the UN Youth Climate Summit next month which will feed in to the 2019 climate change summit in Chile in December. We can all pray that they will make good progress. When Greta was asked if she could persuade the American president that his support was vital, she said "no! I can't persuade everyone", and in fact, if challenged, she always refers back to the scientists who have provided the evidence of what is happening.

And, what is our role? To be attentive to all we can contribute in every waking moment ...

*... in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, AMEN*