

**St. Mary's Holy Communion Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> July 2015**

**Trinity 6 / Proper 10    Prayer III – 'The Lord is here'**

**2 Samuel 6:1-5,12b-19**

**Ephesians 1:3-14**

**Mark 6:14-29**

today is another of those times where I feel like a Masterchef contestant trying to bring together a random assortment of foodstuffs into one coherent dish: this sermon needs to blend together – our two Baptisms, and the Bible readings, as well as being the third of our series on prayer, based on this little book by Henri Nouwen, that follows the shape of the Communion service

but I have a 'special ingredient' to hold them all together, the word 'sacrament': in our Communion service we are heading towards the 'Liturgy of the Sacrament', where we receive Christ in the bread and wine; Baptism is another official 'sacrament' of the church, which is sometimes defined as 'an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace'

so the common thread here is the invisible reality of God revealed to us in visible actions and objects and words

when do we feel that God is most real, most present to us? the responses to the Prayer Tree last week suggest some of the answers we might give: we meet God in beautiful scenery, or in the love of a friend, but also in times of anxiety and pain; we may encounter him in church, or at prayer by ourselves, or reading the Bible; in fact, pretty much anywhere and anytime, God can be present to us 'sacramentally', in the people and things around us

how does this fit with our sermon series on prayer? we thought in the first one about 'mourning our losses', beginning our prayer with a cry for help, because we know our need of God; many of us can speak of times when suffering or trouble have driven us to seek God's presence – and it is that desire for God that is the basis for all prayer, and for all encounter with God

next we talked about 'hearing God's word', through Bible reading, books, sermons and so on; this word lifts us out of 'our space' into 'God's space' and enables us to see ourselves and our world with fresh and more hopeful eyes: again God is made present to us there where next? we need to get below the surface – that sense of loss that leads us to seek God, and the word that gives us new perspective, are only preliminaries to a deeper encounter with God

Henri Nouwen's book takes us through the story of the Emmaus Road, where two disciples are walking home, mourning the loss of Jesus, crucified two days before; then a stranger draws alongside them, and explains how Jesus' suffering and death were actually necessary to God's plan

this stranger, of course, is the risen Jesus himself, but they don't recognise him yet; yes, they do begin to feel a stirring of new hope as they hear his words, but it is only when they invite him to stay and eat with them at the end of their journey that they truly encounter him and truly understand who he is; Nouwen writes:

‘maybe we are not used to think of the Eucharist [or Communion] as an invitation to Jesus to stay with us; we are more inclined to think about Jesus inviting us to his house, his table, his meal; but Jesus wants to be invited; unless we invite him, he will always remain a stranger, possibly a very attractive, intelligent stranger, with whom we had an interesting conversation, but a stranger nevertheless’

and what applies to our Sunday worship, again applies equally to our prayers: we can be busily telling Jesus everything that’s wrong in our lives, or busily reading the Bible, but our encounter with God will remain at that superficial level, unless we take time to be still and invite him to be present to us

in Revelation 3:20 Jesus says, ‘behold I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with them’; he is waiting for that invitation from each of us; but Nouwen asks whether we’re ready for that deeper relationship:

‘do we want [Jesus] to come to know us behind the walls of our most intimate life? do we want him to touch us where we are most vulnerable? do we want him to enter the back rooms, those rooms that we ourselves prefer to keep safely locked?’

but it is this ‘close encounter’ with God that has the power to transform us deep within, if we will allow him access to those hidden places; and we will only come to that point in our worship or our prayers as we allow time for real stillness of body, heart and mind, time for a deep, attentive listening, a wordless acknowledgement of his presence

after the disciples reach home in Emmaus, and invite Jesus to eat with them, he takes bread, blesses it, breaks it and gives it to them – then their eyes are opened and they recognise him at last

perhaps we have some sense of this in that moment of inwardness and quiet at the altar rail, as we accept the full significance of all that Jesus has done for us, mediated in bread and wine? ‘the Lord is here, his Spirit is with us’, we say; that can be our real experience, as we invite and recognise God’s presence with us

I hope too that our Baptism candidates will sense the presence of God in the simple words and actions of the Baptism itself: the pouring of water to cleanse them from sin and to give them new life by the Holy Spirit, and our prayers for God’s grace and blessing upon them all these are different forms of ‘sacrament’, moments when God is revealed to us as we invite him into our lives and attend to his presence with us

just a quick look now at our final ingredient, the readings, which are a real mixed bag! in 2 Samuel and Mark 6, we meet two very contrasting kings who reveal very clearly in their actions their inner spiritual state: David filled with joy at doing God’s will, as the Ark is brought to Jerusalem; Herod aghast at the consequences of turning his back on God, as he is forced to execute a good man – a warning to us all!

perhaps better to focus instead on those wonderful words from Ephesians 1, Paul’s great outpouring of praise and thanksgiving for all God’s good gifts to those who seek him, who open their hearts and lives to his presence; why not take time to read those words again and imagine them spoken directly to us? here they are in brief:

God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing; he has chosen us in Christ, and adopted us as his children; he has redeemed us, forgiven our sins, and marked us with the Holy Spirit, the stamp and seal of his ownership – and all this not just for our own sakes, but ‘for the praise of his glory’ – what an amazing series of statements!

these wonderful gifts are for all who believe and trust in Jesus; and they are blessings that we ‘grow into’, as we invite God’s presence with us in worship and prayer, day by day and week by week

may we know more and more each day the joy and fulfilment of walking with Jesus, and of knowing his presence more deeply within us, as we invite him to share in our lives