

The locked door

Thought for the week, 3 June 2020

Nick Mayhew-Smith

Jesus, as we remember in the Easter Season, was not troubled by a locked door. One of his most important appearances was of course in the room where his disciples gathered after the Crucifixion. Afraid for their very lives, they had locked the door firmly, a detail that John considers important enough to mention in chapter 20 on two separate occasions.

Yet Jesus appeared among them even so. We are on the other side of that door right now, our places of worship closed for weeks on end, shut out rather than shut in. Still we do our best to keep going.

If we the church learn just one lesson from lockdown perhaps it might be a lasting reminder that we are lucky to have such free and easy access, and should never take it for granted again. I'm not convinced that will happen, but there are certainly lessons to be learned.

I've spent a fair bit of time over the past few years camping out in the wild, sleeping in abandoned hermit caves, sheltering on lonely little islands, casting a fearful eye on gathering storm clouds far out to sea. All to research my book on Celtic wilderness spirituality, I should add, lessons from the margins of the landscape and from the margins of our recorded history alike. God is certainly present out there, sky is his cathedral vaulting and the trees his mighty columns. But it was hard even so to adapt to such a minimalist, primal form of existence, for soul and body alike.

One thing I would often say to myself – as I awoke cold and damp, or emerged from the chilly sea after my morning wash, or kept only birdsong for company – was that I would never take my creature comforts for granted again.

Imagine stepping into a shower and having instant hot water, retreating into a comfortable bed, or going out to see friends at will! After one particularly intense week living along the east coast of Scotland two years ago I was convinced that I would return changed: humbled and grateful for the small things in life. It probably only took two days before I didn't even stop to think as I switched on the shower.

So I think it will take a real effort to remember any of this once life returns to normal. It's easy to say now that we will make permanent changes, will cut down our flying for example, or spend less on pointless stuff in the shops. We need to remember that we haven't actually given up anything yet, but rather we've simply been denied. Making virtue of necessity is certainly comforting and a good instinct for getting us through difficulty, even though it is sometimes hard to give thanks to God for everything in our lives.

Maybe a more focused approach will be to remind ourselves that so many people simply can't get to church anyway. Before the lockdown I used to think often of the empty chairs left not by people who have died, but people who are no longer able to make it regularly on Sunday morning. I thank God then and now for the work of our ministry team, visiting and

connecting still. Often that takes the form of a visit in person, but there are also phone calls, emails, and prayers. And that's been all of us of late.

Locked doors apart, there are many reasons why church in terms of a building full of the gathered faithful can be difficult to enter. We might be tired or run down, unwilling to face a crowd or even to meet someone where there are problems unresolved.

Our God is always there for us, unchanging and unchanged, eternal and ever-present, our one constant and our one true refuge. We meet him on the road and on the mountain as much as we do on either side of a closed door.

My prayer this week has no copyright issues attached, because it is a doxology I wrote at the end of my hermit travels to the wilderness, and is partly based on a paragraph by Carl Jung.

Doxology: Creator

Show me the place where the paint is made that colours the world

Where the light is created that makes shine the splendour of the dawn

Show me the well that feeds the rivers and the rain

The grass that makes the bread and fires the oven

Play me the chord that tunes the music of the spheres

The pulse that marks the rhythms of time and tide

Show me the mount from where all creatures can be seen

Naked limbs knit fast in the wonder of the womb

Show me the seed that touches heaven with its branches

The birds of every land that flock beneath its shade

Show me the hope that illuminates the darkness of the void

The lines and shapes of all forms.