

Sunday 24 February 2008: Third Sunday of Lent

From here to there

Readings: Exodus 17.1-7; John 4.5-42

'From the wilderness of Sin, the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages, as the Lord commanded.' Exodus 17.1

The book of Exodus, from which our first reading this morning was taken, tells us something really important about what it means to be part of God's people, of what it is like to have joined the company of those who have known the liberating love of God in their lives. For those original ex-rabble of slaves, known as Israel, which literally means 'the people of God', it was a question of moving on, of travelling from here to there. And if there is one thing one can say about wandering through a desert, it's best not to dig your heels in and refuse to move on; in the desert you have to travel light and to keep moving in order to survive!

For Christians this sense of living between here and there is even more pronounced, and the imperative to keep moving has, certainly in key epochs of Christian history, been an urgent one. Here, says the author of the epistle to the Hebrews, we have no abiding city. So wherever we find ourselves, we are literally between here and there.

This jolts us out of our contentment, and opens us to the people around us and the places beyond the horizon of our comfort zone. Well, all this can sound a little abstract, particularly when we consider the fact that well over 20% of those currently living in this city of London have come from elsewhere. Alongside those who have travelled here from the other side of the globe, are those who have come to this vibrant and sprawling metropolis from the less prosperous countries of Eastern Europe. We live in what seems to be a continuously shifting population, with migrant workers aspiring to find lucrative employment, as well as the new moneyed who are drawn by the luxurious life-style a fashionable city such as London can offer.

Of course, wherever we are, and whatever circumstances we find ourselves in, it's possible to get stuck; we speak of the poverty trap, but equally, and sometimes quite tragically, individuals can also become stuck in their affluent prosperity too....In both scenarios the question will appear – how can I move from where I am to where I should be? How can I move from 'here' to 'there'?

Many years ago I was a curate in Stoke Newington. It was a vibrant, multi-racial community, and in those days there would be frequent callers at the Rectory, of those who used to be called 'down and outs'. In those days the parish used to provide and host a lunch on Christmas Day for our regular callers in the Church Hall. One of those Christmas Day lunches is distinctly imprinted on my memory. My parents were with us, and I recall that on that occasion my mother, who was a thoroughgoing south coast Tory had a magnificent time. During the lunch I sat next to two of our regular callers, Frank and Whalley, who, I pray, are now enjoying 'the social joys of heaven.' Half way through the Christmas dinner Frank elbowed Whalley in the ribs and said: 'Hurry up, we've got to get over to St. Martins-in-Fields for our tea!'

For those two colourful characters life was always on the move, moving from here to there. It is these two words 'here' and 'there' that I'd like us to reflect on this morning. The 'here' is this place, this space where we have gathered together to celebrate this eucharist, and 'there'

is not some distant place, but is just across Trafalgar Square, the National Gallery. The Gallery happens to be one of my favourite places. Indeed, if I was here, I'd probably be tempted to spend too much time over there. On those occasions when I come up to London for a meeting, I try, whenever possible to spend half an hour, or more in the Gallery. I go to see the art, sometimes just wandering from room to room, until a particular picture calls for my attention, and there I pause, and try to really look. There is, of course, a real difference between just seeing something and really looking at it. Indeed, a good working definition of what makes something a work of art is that it invites and holds your attention. But to be honest, another reason for visiting the National Gallery is not only to view the art, or to attend a particular exhibition, but also to engage in that equally fascinating pastime of 'people watching', and the National Gallery is a marvellous place for that as the whole world seems to pass in and out of its doors.

When the Tate Modern opened it was claimed that in our largely secular society art galleries were the new Cathedrals. As I am now working in a Cathedral which attracts nearly a million visitors a year, this is a question which intrigues me. In its first ten years Tate Modern has been a huge success, and large numbers of people, and all kinds of people pass through that magnificent space of the turbine hall. But what exactly is it that attracts them, why have galleries become so popular, not just as the sort of places you might have felt you should visit, but as a venue for a good day out?

Well, let's look from here to over there – at the National Gallery. In his sumptuous book *Painting the Word*, John Drury has this to say about the new Sainsbury Wing at the National... '[it] makes amends for the exile of Christian devotional pictures in a secular institution. No longer need they hang on the walls of quasi-aristocratic saloons. The rooms with their grey columns and arches, lend a sense of being in church, and sometimes provide sanctuary-like spaces for altarpieces'. This is an interesting and perceptive observation, and the value of art John Drury alludes to is not the absurdly inflated monetary value of art on the art markets of the world, but something that belongs to its making and the kind of responses it can elicit from the viewer. This is something that strikes me when I look at the work of the frequently impecunious and troubled artist, Vincent van Gogh as it hangs on a gallery wall. Drury tells how in a previous era, art decorated the rooms and corridors of the moneyed aristocracy, and we might also think of the increasing trend of financial institutions and city corporations purchasing contemporary art at astronomical prices to decorate their corridors and boardrooms. But what really interests me is the value of art as *art*.

In pursuing that line of enquiry, I am sure that we will find some surprising correspondences between 'here' and 'there', between the spaces of a church building and that of an art gallery.

Of course, visiting an art gallery to view art can be a diversion from the everyday claims and demands of life, but we all, from time to time need a space in which we can, from time to time, step aside from the frenetic pace and pressure of our daily lives. We need special places in which to be refreshed and enchanted.

In the art gallery we can wander fairly aimlessly, but there, as in here we need to learn not just to see, but to really look. And it is precisely at this point that our Lenten theme can help us. In the Bible we are told that the first prophets were known as 'seers', - literally, 'see-ers.' Is it too much to say that this is what God is calling us to be in our Christian lives, people who can see, see beyond the mere appearances to what is really real in peoples' lives?

At this point we can return to the Gospel story for today. It is a story which tells of the encounter and exchange between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, a meeting which in its time

was a shocking crossing of the social boundaries of race and gender...A rabbi speaking to a woman? A Jew speaking to a Samaritan? ...

What emerges in this long narrative of this encounter in John's Gospel is the gradual coming to face the truth. For the Samaritan woman it was coming to face the truth of her relationships, for us, here and now, it is the truth of who we are and the truth of the kind of world we live in which confronts us as we encounter Christ in his Word, his sacraments, and in those around us. What we can come to see through these encounters is that what really matters is not only our being truthful about who and what we are, but also having our eyes really opened to see the world as it really is; a world with a gaping divide between those who find themselves on a descending spiral of deprivation, and those receiving astronomical salaries and additional bonuses and financial incentives. But wherever we are on this divide we can be equally trapped and blinkered in our perceptions.

It has been estimated that by 2020 it has been estimated that depression will reach epidemic proportions...When people are locked in such a dark place, of dreary listlessness, in which the world around them to be oppressively dull, we will need art, and more, places of simple beauty, like this restored church of St Martin, to raise the human spirit and to offer a glimmer of glory (to use a laden religious word), to lighten our mood and beckon us to step from here to there.

Finally, I'd like to mention a cruciform figure by the artist Peter Eugene Ball which hangs in a transept of Winchester Cathedral. This simply figure of the crucified was constructed from discarded material, but on this the artist has used gold paint and inserted strips of bronze so that the sculpture catches and reflects the light. For me, this reflection of the light is an intimation, a hint of redemptive beauty. For this icon of the Passion shows that if we are prepared to really *look*, and to look even in the human pain, muddle and loss which is represented in the cross of Jesus Christ, we will see a trace of God.

“Christ hung upon the cross deformed; but his deformity was our beauty” (from a sermon of Augustine of Hippo).

Canon Christopher Irvine, Canterbury Cathedral