



Seeing and Believing: Christ the Cornerstone

A sermon by Revd Katherine Hedderly

Readings: Ephesians 2.19-end; John 20.24-29

The Bevedere in Vienna houses a fabulous collection of work by the painter Gustav Klimt. It is the largest collection in the world of this artist who was co-leader of the artistic Secession movement at the turn of the 19th century, and a key figure of the breakthrough of avant-garde in Vienna.

Close up, most striking are his lesser-known landscapes, painted during summers of ease and relaxation, on the shores of Attersee, and the influence of these spills over into his figurative work, like his best known painting, 'The Kiss', that tumbles with flowers and foliage. It is impossible not to experience a feeling of wonderment, in the detail of the images, the texture, the colour, the vibrancy and peace, of paintings such as 'The Apple Tree', from 1911 or 'Farmhouse in Upper Austria', painted in 1912. Every part of the canvas sings with the life of tree, flower, leaf, fruit, light and shade.

Flowers were Klimt's passion. In a letter to a friend on a journey to Bavaria he writes 'I have seen so many flowers which gave me such a wonderful feeling.' Impressions of his garden; 'on the way through my garden the breath of spring – birdsong – the buds are opening – one day can make a difference!'¹ It is not possible to sense that feeling of wonderment in reproductions of his work. But standing in front of the real paintings is like experiencing that 'wonderful feeling', he describes, his oneness with nature. It is truly joyful and makes the heart soar with recognition and delight.

Hermann Bahr an art critic of the time comments on his landscapes; 'Klimt has the power, by producing such works, to depict them in such a way that they affect us like parables or images of a spiritual condition. He does not merely paint a random feeling into a randomly seen landscape but he appears to divest them entirely of subjectivity...he is unable to touch anything without giving it a spirit and a soul.'

Really looking or seeing, like that kind of gazing at a painting, is about allowing what we look at to affect us and make a connection with our spirit and soul, and transform us.

It is that kind of looking, that recognition, that we hear described in the encounter between Jesus and Thomas in our Gospel reading today. A moment of connection, of revelation and joy, where Thomas lets go of his uncertainty and disbelief, allows himself to take in the risen Jesus before him, in the same way that we might fully absorb or dwell upon a painting. He dares to believe in him and lets hope fill his soul, and his heart soar.

In John's Gospel the connection between seeing and faith is a constant theme, between seeing who Jesus really is, and with the heart, believing in him. Jesus is hidden to those without faith, who cannot see or recognise that he is the Christ, but to those that can he is a doorway into a new life and way of seeing and living and being in the world. The Samaritan woman in her enthusiasm invites people to come and see the man who had told her everything she had ever done. Responding to her invitation, and seeing Jesus for themselves, many believed. The sight of the blind man was restored so that he might 'see' – his response to Jesus the simple but powerful 'Lord, I believe'.

¹ *Gustav Klimt Landscapes*, Stephan Koja, Prestel Publishing 2006, p. 60

Each time an encounter with Jesus brings transformation. Lives are turned around. The disciples hear the verbal account of the resurrection from Mary Magdalen 'I have seen the Lord', but it is not until Jesus comes to the Upper Room on the evening of that first day of the week, and stands before them offering them his peace, showing them his wounds, that they see and rejoice and believe. Later, when Thomas hears of this encounter he replies provocatively but honestly, seeking his own independent experience; 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

He really wants to know for himself, not just go along with the others. And don't we want to see for ourselves? Thomas gives us permission to seek a response to our own questions and disbelief. We also want to know that our faith is real. We want to see and take in, absorb and dwell on the risen Christ for ourselves.

Later, when Jesus again appears to the disciples he invites Thomas, who this time is present, to touch his wounds. 'Do not doubt, but believe'. In the Eastern church Thomas is known not as doubting Thomas, but 'the believer'. A more active reading of Jesus' words as we have in some translations might be 'do not be disbelieving but believe'.

Jesus wills Thomas to recognise the life and hope that is being offered to him. And Thomas seizes it with joy and responds. 'My Lord and my God!' He recognises that there is something tangible and certain, and not only that Jesus is Lord but that in him he can *see God*. His response is an affirmation of Jesus' words spoken to him earlier in the Gospel; 'If you know me you will know the Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.'

We do not see Jesus physically standing before us as Thomas did, but there are opportunities to recognise the reality of his risen life and meet him and dwell on him in one another and in the circumstances of our lives, and through this believe in him.

Just this week I had a conversation with someone about real wounds and the certain faith that has come from them. I could recognise the imprint of Jesus on the landscape of this person's life. See the joy and hope that is welling up as a result and the transformation that is taking place; the texture of light and shade, the colour, the fruitfulness and peace, as they seek to offer themselves in response to his felt presence in their life. This was someone who was really saying for themselves, through the journey of wounds and healing 'I have seen the Lord' and was living out their own response 'My Lord and my God'.

When we have had this sense of recognition of really seeing and absorbing who Christ is for us, our lives begin to change and we start to make choices that are Christ centred. Begin to live out his image in our own lives, our lives taking shape around his. Like that picture of Christ as the cornerstone that Paul gives the Ephesians, for the new community that forms around him, the cornerstone that shapes and defines how other stones will be set, and so creates the pattern of the whole dwelling place.

This new community, is not static but organic, a living growing dwelling place for God, where people belong, not because of their ethnicity or nationality, Jew or Gentile, or because of their age, or sexual orientation or intelligence, or able-bodiedness, or social status but through their recognition of Christ in their lives. Joined together, growing, supporting one another, spiritually connected, welcoming, open to all. This holy temple described more like a living landscape than a building. Those who confess Christ as Lord are the living stones of the community, centred on Christ, who provides the texture and colour, the shape and growth and fruitfulness.

As we come to baptise Marieta today, a member of our children's C-Club, and gather with Peter and Rebecca and her godparents, we gather as that living community ourselves; joined in Christ, living

out that belief that we have seen the Lord in one another, offering ourselves in his service and for the world. Perhaps if someone were to really look at this community, gaze on the diversity of its texture and colour and vibrancy, as they might do a painting, as we welcome Marieta as part of this dwelling place for God, they might recognise the life and soul of Christ's presence here, alive and active, and be able to say 'I have seen the Lord', 'My Lord and my God' and maybe their heart might soar and their soul might sing.