

'The Presence'

Evensong sermon at St James Lower Hutt by the Rev Derek Lightbourne, May 8th, 2022

Continuing in the series on Christian art this evening is 'The Presence', a work by Scottish artist Alfred Borthwick painted in 1910 and now hanging in Edinburgh Cathedral.

You are invited first to reflect on the painting, then we can delve a little into its unusual history how it came to be lost then re-discovered and presented to the Cathedral in 1944.

Then to reflect on the chosen readings as they provide scripture accounts of God's divine presence to humans. And finally, how these might have application for our Christian experience.

- 1) Have a *closer peruse* on the screen. One is drawn to the sanctuary of the cathedral and the brilliant golden colour emanating out and reflecting down the aisle. This is evocative of the vision of Isaiah in his experience of the divine in the Temple: 'In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty, and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs... called to one another and said, 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory.' (Is.6). Looking closely there seems to be figures in the sanctuary. They could be those who've gone before us and who now dwell in the nearer presence of God. There's a congregation towards the front of the nave, kneeling in prayer. Natural light emanates from the high windows providing light in the darkened building. Then toward the back another brilliant light – the presence – of the resurrected Christ. Note the outstretched hand reaching out in comfort and sympathy toward an elderly woman humbly kneeling. The 'presence' spreads out and seems to envelope her, stretching across the floor. [Pause]
- 2) A commentary on the painting tells 'it had many adventures before it found its permanent home in St Mary's Cathedral Edinburgh'. Shortly after it was painted it was displayed throughout England and then sent to Germany for reproductions to be made. It was in Munich when the first World War was declared. It was then sold to an American. It disappeared from public view until a paper in New York asked a question of the times - 'Is religion dead?' And with it included a section of Borthwick's painting. An answer came to the question – and with it the comment: 'No because of Christ's abiding presence in his church'. It was thus known where it was, in the US. At the end of the war an act of Congress allowed it to be returned to Scotland. And in 1944 it was presented by the artist and his wife to the Cathedral and there is presently displayed.
- 3) Thinking of the inspiration of the theme I'm mindful of accounts in *scripture of divine appearances*. An early one in the story of the Hebrew peoples experience of the divine is of Jacob and his dream when at Bethel. There was a significant message for Jacob of God's destiny for him. Then he awoke and exclaimed 'Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it! (Gen.28.16) Then it was Moses who experienced a divine 'theophany' in the episode of the burning bush and the message of the divine 'for the place where on which you are standing is holy ground.' And a third one we heard in the first reading of Elijah out in the wilderness and the Lord appears, not in the wind, not in the earthquake, not in the fire, but 'the sound of sheer silence', or as the Authorised Version translates the original, 'the still small voice.'

It's appropriate that this depiction of 'The Presence' features in the Easter season. Think of unexpected appearances of the risen Christ, on the beach, in the garden, on the road to Emmaus, and in the Upper Room.

We might think that such experiences of the divine were limited to the people of God in scripture, and not to people of faith - in these days. Yet I invite you to think of times you have experienced divine presence, be it in creation, or it could have been church or cathedral. I recall being in Sri Lanka and taking off sandals to enter sacred buildings there, very spiritual experiences. Or in Chartres Cathedral in France and in the dim light of the cathedral viewing the myriad colours of stained-glass windows high up. And hearing a visiting choir - one might have described it as 'Heaven on earth.' A recent 'holy ground' experience to visit the vicinity and bay where the gospel was first preached in this country in 1814. At the service we had in the park it was spiritually uplifting singing the carol Te Harinui: 'Then on a summer's day within a quiet bay the Māori people heard the great and glorious word.....'

4) In other instances, we might have been aware that divine presence came in in your presence in *caring* for one in distress. Somehow in the timing (providence) you happened to be there and became aware of something special and precious going on in the 'meeting.' One remembers that sentence of the second reading Jesus said, - 'Inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these brothers or sisters of mine you did it to me.' Someone has written of the painting 'it shows that his (divine) presence can be experienced where it is needed and not just up at the altar where most of the congregation are gathered.' [Pause]

That second reading, from the gospel of Matthew while from a parable bears consideration of the church's prerogative to be caring - for the hungry, the thirsty, as a stranger, or those without clothes, the sick, and those in prison; and as our bishop encourages of caring for 'the last, the lost and the least.' Into that need in our time, included are the unvaccinated, the hungry, the homeless, those affected by covid and by war.

Before concluding may I mention one other very special place of divine presence, being 'Eucharistic.' As the start the leader pronounces 'the Lord is here'. And the response 'God's Spirit is with us.' I'm mindful of St Paul's teaching: 'Every time you eat of this bread and drink of this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.' (1 Cor 11,26). The resurrection appearances of Jesus are of divine surprise, as for the disciples on the road to Emmaus and arriving at the house, the 'stranger' breaks bread and shares it. Likewise, Jesus' appearance early in the morning and the catch of fish and sharing food is also Eucharistic. For me the receiving of the bread and cup are sacred moments, recognising divine presence. There Jesus meets us, as we stand or kneel to receive the holy sacrament. I remember being in the United States where people referred to the whole inside of the church as being the 'Sanctuary.' Of St James, read the inscription outside, of this being a *holy place*: 'To the glory of God the Father who has called us by his grace, and of his Son who loved us and gave himself for us and of the Holy Spirit who illumines us and sanctifies us, we dedicate this church.....'

In conclusion then, this evocative painting 'The Presence' has here and now significance for our spiritual life. It's an affirmation of the Divine relationship: of God's presence, Christ who is with us, and Holy Spirit - Paraclete, the one who comes alongside to help. The Lord's blessing be on you as you meditate on 'The Presence'. Amen.