

Countisbury Church Epilogue: 28th June 2020

Introduction

Today would have marked the beginning of the Epilogues at Countisbury Church. At this point it is not clear whether we may be able to gather for these acts of evening worship as the summer progresses, but for today, I have chosen to send a version of the service I would have led to the whole Mission Community mailing list – so though the Epilogue regulars may miss their pilgrimage up to the church on the hill, others may get a taste of this distinctive summer pattern of worship that has been offered at St John's Countisbury for over thirty years now.

The Epilogues began as a response to concerns about the viability of Countisbury church from John and Pauline Pedder. Rather than try to keep services going all through the year, this was an opportunity to be led by good sense and the special nature of this particular church, to focus on a series of services that enabled people to come close to God by entering into the church's beauty, and remarkable location, in the late evenings the summer offers. I wonder if this is a vision that might inspire adjustments to the pattern of worship in other churches across the Mission Community during this time.

The services are about half an hour starting at 8.30 and each week a different invited leader – lay or ordained- leads a service on a theme of their own choosing, which typically includes hymns, a Biblical reading, some words of reflection and some prayers. It is not unknown for the service to be followed by a time of fellowship at the Blue Ball afterwards, (and some people choose to go for a walk before the service and watch the sunset on the way home).

Epilogue 1

My first hymn is "Let us build a house" . You can listen to it hear:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GlnVLP0qFEo>

It is the hymn I choose to be included in the service at which I was ordained as priest.

Let us build a house
Where love can dwell
And all can safely live,
A place where
Saints and children tell
How hearts learn to forgive.

Built of hopes and dreams and visions,
Rock of faith and vault of grace;
Here the love of Christ shall end divisions;

Let us build a house where prophets speak,
And words are strong and true,
Where all God's children dare to seek
To dream God's reign anew.

Here the cross shall stand as witness
And a symbol of God's grace;
Here as one we claim the faith of Jesus:

Let us build a house where love is found
In water, wine and wheat:
A banquet hall on holy ground,
Where peace and justice meet.

Here the love of God, through Jesus,
Is revealed in time and space;
As we share in Christ the feast that frees us:

All are welcome, all are welcome,
All are welcome in this place.
Writer(s): martyhaugen

Much of what I am going to reflect on today, is drawn from the first chapter of a book called "An Altar in the World" by Barbara Brown Taylor. I read it some years ago, but have recalled it during this time when we have not been able to worship in our church

buildings. The author describes the book as offering practices with a long religious history that enable us to find the holiness of the life we live daily. She begins her first chapter: "The Practice of Waking up to God" with a quote from the mystic Mechtild of Magdeburg:

The day of my spiritual awakening was the day I saw-and knew I saw- all things in God and God in all things.

Then she describes a visit to a particular place in Hawaii where the power of nature in the place brought her a powerful sense of the presence of God. She noticed there three stones had been set up to stand vertically and it took her back to the story of Jacob's encounter with God at the place he would call Bethel.

Genesis 28:10-22

Jacob's Dream at Bethel

¹⁰Jacob left Beer-sheba and went towards Haran. ¹¹He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. ¹²And he dreamed that there was a ladder^[a] set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³And the LORD stood beside him^[b] and said, 'I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; ¹⁴and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed^[c] in you and in your offspring. ¹⁵Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.' ¹⁶Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!' ¹⁷And he was afraid, and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.'

¹⁸So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. ¹⁹He called that place Bethel;^[d] but the name of the city was Luz at the first. ²⁰Then Jacob made a vow, saying, 'If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing

to wear, ²¹so that I come again to my father's house in peace, then the LORD shall be my God, ²²and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you.'

Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it..

This is none other than the house of God and the gate of heaven....

Out in the wilderness on his journey out into the unknown after tricking his brother out of his birthright, Jacob has an encounter with God which is life changing.

Memories of this story as she sat by the ocean prompted Barbara Brown Taylor to remember too, how through her childhood, her explorations of the natural world had been the place in which she had fully experienced God's presence with her. This conviction of God's presence though had led her to seek out the places where people worshipped God – to head indoors to the church of her neighbourhood and as she grew up within a worshipping community she had somehow learnt that it was there alone that God was to be met and properly honoured.

What she goes on to observe is that very often in their devotion to God church people get more and more involved in church activity, to the extent that church life and the presence of God become so linked that they lose the sense that God can meet them anywhere, and so begin to miss meeting God in God's transformative power at all.

When she returns to the Bible she sees that is not how God is revealed within its pages – through the Old Testament people meet God in deserts and under trees as well as in the Temple, and Jesus' teaching again and again takes us back into the world around us: "Consider the lilies of the field...the birds of the air...."

This brings her immense joy:

"I do not have to choose between the Sermon on the Mount and the magnolia trees. God can come to me by a still pool on the big island of Hawaii as well as at the altar of the Washington National Cathedral. The House of God stretches from one corner of the universe to the other. Sea monsters and ostriches live in it, along with people who pray in languages I do not speak, whose names I will never know.....

Human beings may separate things into as many piles as we wish—separating spirit from flesh, sacred from secular, church from world. But we should not be surprised when God does not recognise the distinctions we make..Earth is so thick with divine possibility that it is a wonder we can walk anywhere without cracking our shins on altars. Jacob's nowhere about which he knew nothing, turned out to be the House of God. Even though his family had imploded, even though he had made his brother angry enough to kill him, even though he was a scoundrel from the word go – God decided to visit Jacob right where he was.. God gave Jacob vision, so Jacob could see angels going up and down from earth to heaven, going about their business in the one and only world there is.

The vision showed Jacob something he did not know. He slept in the House of God. He woke at the gate of heaven. None of this was his doing. The only think he did right was to see where he was and say so. Then he turned his pillar into an altar before he set off, praising the God who had come to him where he was..." (pp.13-16 *An Altar in the World* by Barbara Brown Taylor)

What she is encouraging us to see is that we do not control where and when we are visited by God, but we do have the choice of whether we respond to God's presence when it happens. We can talk ourselves out of it, or we can "set a little altar in the world or in my heart".

One of the reasons places have churches built in them, is because people have recognised holiness that place, they are in thin places, places of pilgrimage and in sight, in other cases buildings become the sign for God's presence to be recognised and gather the feeling of holiness through centuries of prayer and

worship. They are expressions of that response to God that Jacob had: to set up an altar to mark God's presence. They were not built as exclusive places of God's presence, but as reminders that the whole world is a house of God, the whole world is God's church. When we leave them after worship there is the hope that our vision has been clarified to see where their worship might continue in our daily surroundings.

Over the years I have been attending the Epilogue at Countisbury I have been increasingly intrigued by what it is about the little church which so brings me a sense of God's presence.

As I have reflected with Barbara Brown Taylor's thoughts, I am wondering whether it is because although the church is sturdily built as a suitable haven from the elements in its coastal position somehow there is a merging of its inner sanctuary with the outer beauty of the land around it. The edges are blurred between church and nature, creation and redemption even humans and the creatures around us. Perhaps for me, on these summer evenings it becomes something of a parable for all that Barbara Brown Taylor is pointing to: "God does not recognise the distinctions we make", "The House of God stretches from one corner of the universe to the other".

I think if it had been possible at Countisbury I would have invited everybody to go outside for the time of prayer.

If it is possible for you to go outside, or look out of the window I invite you to take these prayers to that place.

God of Bethel,

Who surprised Jacob with a vision of angels, help us to recognise your presence in this place, even if we didn't know it before

God of our churches

Who inspired those faithful ones before us to set up altars in our world, guide us in our life together so that we can see both where

you are at work and join in and where you are not at work and we need to conserve our energy

God of all Creation

Whose hand is seen in all your works, help us to treasure our common home and all you have made as your House offered as your gift of love to all that lives.

Amen

My final hymn is a call for us to join with all creation in the praise of God:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0CTclCIS_XQ

1. All creatures of our God and King,
Lift up your voice and with us sing,
Alleluia! Alleluia!
Thou burning sun with golden beam,
Thou silver moon with softer gleam!
 - o *Refrain:*
O praise Him! O praise Him!
Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!
2. Thou rushing wind that art so strong,
Ye clouds that sail in heav'n along,
O praise Him! Alleluia!
Thou rising moon, in praise rejoice,
Ye lights of evening, find a voice!
3. Thou flowing water, pure and clear,
Make music for thy Lord to hear,
O praise Him! Alleluia!
Thou fire so masterful and bright,
That givest man both warmth and light.
4. And all ye men of tender heart,
Forgiving others, take your part,
O praise Him! Alleluia!
Ye who long pain and sorrow bear,
Praise God and on Him cast your care!
5. Let all things their Creator bless,
And worship Him in humbleness,

O praise Him! Alleluia!
Praise, praise the Father, praise the Son,
And praise the Spirit, Three in One!

We end with a prayer of blessing:

Deep peace of the running wave to you.
Deep peace of the flowing air to you.
Deep peace of the quiet earth to you.
Deep peace of the shining stars to you.
Deep peace of Christ the Prince of Peace to you

And the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit be with us this,
wherever we are, this night and always. Amen.