

Sunday 15 January 2006: The Second Sunday of Epiphany

Sands through our hands

Readings: Revelation 5. 1-10; John 1. 43-end

Jesus said to Nathanael, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these'. John 1:50

If you are a fan of Derren Brown - the illusionist, mind reader and hypnotist - you may have watched Channel 4's *The Heist* last night. Brown uses the techniques of neuro-linguistic programming to interpret and influence people's behaviour. *The Heist* was an experiment where he attempted to manipulate some middle-management businessmen and women into taking the opportunity to steal a hundred thousand pounds in what they believed was a genuine armed robbery.

It was absolutely astounding because three out of four of them actually did it – or at least attempted to. As the result of a so-called 'motivational seminar' they went from being law-abiding individuals to people who on the spur of the moment were willing to steal from a bank. They were de-programmed afterwards and purged of their temporary criminal tendencies but in the meantime it made salutary viewing.

Why do we believe what we believe about the reality that surrounds us and the way we can and ought to relate to it? '*Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!*', says Nathanael, who only minutes before has been deeply cynical about the possibility that anyone who comes from Nazareth will impress him at all. '*Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree?*' Jesus asks. '*There's better than that to come!*'

If only religious faith were as simple as mind games and party tricks. In actuality for most of us there are days when our confidence in what we think we know of God is at a pretty low ebb – or at least undergoing a radical re-think - whether because of the circumstances in which we find ourselves, things that happen to other people, or just a general sense that in the grey light of a late winter afternoon God's absence is more easy to grasp than God's presence.

And yet something makes us hang on in there. That something may be no more than a chance human connection that suggests to us a source of love and grace which comes from beyond either ourself or the other person. We may perceive in creation something that points to an eternal presence nurturing and sustaining and underpinning the very fabric of our world. Or we may experience a moment of conviction that has no obvious cause or connection with anything that we can point to - and yet it happens.

Our hold on faith can seem tenuous and uncertain one moment – inexplicably resilient the next.

There's an area in Embankment Gardens which some time ago our daughter, Hannah, named 'Heaven'. It's a circle enclosed by tall green hedges, which in summer basks in kindly warmth and light, and has delicate flowers spilling over the edges of large concrete containers around the edges.

Yesterday in the cold weary light of January we walked through this place on our way back from visiting the fishpond. It was the first time we'd been there since my father died. Hannah,

with a sudden joyful quickening, said 'It's Heaven. Where's Grandad?' With a sinking feeling that this was to be the first serious hurdle in the development of her faith I took a deep breath and said 'This is *pretend* heaven, Hannah – Grandad's in the real heaven isn't he, so he won't be here.' She was back at me like lightning and with the unfailing logic and conviction of a four year old: 'But *pretend* Grandad's here, isn't he?' she said.

In this time of the Epiphany – the awakening of the world to the presence of Christ in its midst – we are given stories from the Gospels in which people experience clues to God's presence among them. Some of those people are very suggestible and ready to believe – Mary the mother of Jesus at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. Some of them are very cynical – Nathanael, writing off Nazareth and its people as incapable of bearing good – or God – in any way.

For us, as for these characters, sometimes the signs of God are longed for or searched out – sometimes they come as unbidden and grace-filled blessings.

'Then I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll written on the inside and on the back, sealed with seven seals ... and I began to weep bitterly because no-one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. Then one of the elders said to me 'Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals'.

We long to see, to touch, truly to know and understand the things of God. But belief and understanding can feel more like sand running through our hands than a rock on which to stand. Then again, as with Nathanael, the conviction that we have experienced something from beyond ourselves and our human control can come surging like a full tide, pregnant with the possibility of new experiences and offering new depth to old ones.

For the flat that we're moving to when 'life beyond St Martin's' becomes a reality, my husband Antony recently bought a bronze plaque. It is inscribed with the ancient Spartan proverb, recorded by Erasmus and popularised by Carl Jung – who had it over the doorway of his house and on his tombstone - 'Bidden or not bidden, God is present'.

We are called to commit ourselves to living with eyes and hearts wide open to the possibility of encounter with God. God knows and understands the fickleness of our conviction – the swelling tides of belief and disbelief that characterise our daily experience of what it is to be human – and asks only that we do not dismiss the things of faith outright, but keep open the channels and interstices through which faith might flood or trickle.

What we can't do is control our experience of the divine. What we can do is to be open to it.

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