

## Sunday 19 July 2009: Sixth Sunday after Trinity

### Life at the edge

**Readings: Ephesians 2.11-end; Mark 6.30-34, 53-end**

There was a moment on this community's Parish Weekend at Worth Abbey last week (entitled *Community and Growth*) when I had a glimpse of what community in Christ means for us. It was at the final Eucharist; for those who don't know the Abbey Church, the altar is set on a wide circular dais, and those who took part in the weekend gathered around it, symbolising the connectedness to one another, like the branches on the vine. At our feet was a rope vine tied with the prayers and thoughts and reflections we had had about the weekend, which was just drawing to a close. There was a sense that we were on the very edge of something. Newcomer, child, those who had been part of this community for years and the tentative finding their feet, not quite sure they belong; equal, alongside one another, connected. Space and thoughts too for those gathered here last week. All were included, each affirmed for who they were and for their giftedness. It was a place of life and vitality and energy. Like being on the edge of an ocean; circled around that altar felt dynamic and creative. With Christ at the centre.

The artwork from the weekend that you see hanging here in church today is an expression of that life. The fruitful vine, a symbol of the creative life that was drawn from us, each person making their own contribution – a bird on the wing, a leaf, a bumblebee – a symbol that we each have something unique to offer. The vine, the branches, teeming with life and colour and individuality, behind it the silvery life-giving river of God's spirit that weaves around and sustains us. It is a momentary footprint of the life of this community that was shared. An expression of the call and response to life of a living community. At its centre the heartbeat of God, the life of Christ. A community nourished and sustained but called, as we stood circled around that altar, to be at that risky creative edge, to be outward looking, to share in and engage with that dynamic and creative life on the margins.

That's where we find Jesus in our Gospel reading this morning, living out that tension of needing to be nourished and centred and yet called to minister and live at the edge. The disciples have just returned from their missionary journey. They are wiped out, tired and exhausted, not eating or sleeping properly. Jesus tries to take them away to a desert place for solitude and respite, so that they can share with him the stories of all that they have done in his name. To affirm their connection with him, to tell him of his life that has flowed through them. But as before, earlier in the Gospel, when he tried to go home, and found it so crowded that he couldn't even eat, he is overwhelmed by the spiritual and physical needs of the people around him.

And so rather than this small community ministering to one another, in a place of solitude, they are drawn through compassion to those around them. Jesus puts others and their needs before his own. Again later we find when they land at Gennesaret they are overwhelmed by the crowds desperate even to touch the fringe of his cloak for healing. Crowds on the edge of him, on the edge of his life, on the edge of understanding who he is (teacher and healer but just maybe something more....), perhaps just beginning to glimpse what he really has to offer them. Sheep in need of a shepherd.

The Abbot of Worth, Christopher Jamison talks about the kind of outward looking community Jesus created, that was able to lay its own needs aside and look instead to the

needs of others, both during his ministry and amongst the early Church. In his book *Finding Happiness* he writes;

*“The community that Jesus and his disciples fostered was not simply a close-knit group of friends. It was a group that reached out beyond the normal social barriers to include large numbers of strangers. Strangers here means not only the socially excluded, the lepers and the tax-collectors, but also simply large numbers of people, so large that they are not all personally known to each other. This is what struck people about the early Christians, that they could be so generous to so many people. This is true community; a group that reaches beyond friendship....”<sup>1</sup>*

His words encourage us to the kinds of relationships that are demanding and he says ‘*require both humility and generosity to overcome the pride that keeps us safely inside our own busy little worlds.*’ It is this kind of community that engages with life and encourages growth. It is the kind of community we are called to be.

Esther de Waal who spoke last weekend emphasised the need for the cloister in our hectic modern lives. Like the disciples and Jesus who were striving for a place of nourishment and refreshment. The still quiet space where we can dwell under the gaze of God, both a physical space in our lives but also an inner space or empty place for God to dwell within us. If we are to minister to many strangers, to be a place of welcome, to engage with what Abbot Christopher defines as the most pressing ailments of our culture – anger, sadness and spiritual listlessness - then we need to be open and listen with the ear of our hearts to the ocean of God’s love. Connection to the centre gives us freedom and confidence to abide on the edge, with those on the fringe.

We mark Sea Sunday today and give thanks for the life of those called to live their lives and make their livelihoods on the sea, often away from family for long periods of time, exhausted by the relentless life of the ocean that never stops, most recently more vulnerable to unprecedented rise in maritime hijackings. A life lived on the edge of something vast, people who know the reality of what it means to embark into the unknown. On the edge of danger, open to the elements, buffeted by winds and rains and high seas, in touch with the physicality of life and nature. A place of life.

Crosby Beach in Merseyside is home to Anthony Gormley’s *Another Place* sculptures that you may know well. One hundred cast iron figures, all with the same pose, spread along three kilometres of the beach and foreshore, stretching out into the Mersey estuary. Some of them are almost completely submerged, with only the upper part of the torso visible, and look at first glance as if they are in need of rescuing. Others are full figures, only ankle deep in water, or even high and dry on the sand. They all face out across the sea to the horizon, looking to what lies beyond. Mirroring the quest of the seafarer as they straddle the line between sea and shore. A local commenting on them says, ‘*these figures have caused us all to stop and wonder. It’s hard to put into words exactly what it all means but it definitely is life enhancing, life affirming, and beautiful, something that feeds our individual and collective souls.*’ People who live on the edge, who are prepared to struggle with the pull of the tides of life, of anger and sadness, and spiritual *ennui*, for the sake of the Gospel, create something that is attractive and life-affirming and beautiful.

It is Jesus who makes the life that is found there possible. By abandoning all of himself to us, he draws us together and unites us and makes us the place where God can dwell, as he breaks

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<sup>1</sup> Abbot Christopher Jamison ‘*Finding Happiness*’ Weidenfield & Nicholson 2008, p. 185

down all that divides us. For that to be possible we need to bring all of ourselves to him. As Timothy Radcliffe observes in his book on the Eucharist 'Why go to Church?', *'We place our own lives there on the altar, our anxieties and fears and failures, hoping that somehow (he) will accept all that we are, bless us and make us holy. We must place there too our resentment, our anger and our bitterness for (his) healing.'*<sup>2</sup>

In this way, he says,

*'If we abandon ourselves to God, then it can only be as a diver throws himself into the air, surrenders himself to the force of gravity, an act of freedom in which he gains control precisely by losing it.'*

And then we are free to be built together into the dynamic and creative place where others can dwell and find life in him.

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Timothy Radcliffe, *Why Go To Church – The drama of the Eucharist*, Continuum, 2009, p.103