

Sacramental imagination

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Second Sunday after Pentecost, Year A — 11 June 2023

Reverend Martin Johnson

Hosea 5.15-6.6; Psalm 50.7-15; Romans 4.13-25; Matthew 9.9-13, 18-26

So welcome again to this season of the Spirit. The longest season in our calendar; long, because it is the time when you and I, with the Church universal, once again turn to the ongoing work of discerning what it is to live life in the Spirit, the Spirit of Pentecost, the Spirit of the risen Christ. For our Roman sisters and brothers, this is Ordinary Time, but that sounds just a little prosaic, the word ordinary has become, well . . . ordinary! Life in the spirit is of course anything but ordinary, even 'extraordinary' doesn't seem to do it justice!

But on another level, it is all about ordinary things and seemingly ordinary people. Over the last two Sundays I have baptised infants, something unfortunately I now do all too rarely. I spoke about making ordinary lives extraordinary through the waters of baptism. And on Thursday this week, we celebrated the feast of Corpus Christi and spoke of the importance of limits. In a culture that seems to believe that there are no limits, an ordinary scrap of bread and sip of wine remind us that there are. Sacraments remind us of just that as they point to God's limitless love and mercy and order and beauty. We can't have a sacramental life without the gift of spiritual insight, to see the ordinary and to see again. Life in the Spirit, in our tradition, is the sacramental life.

Last week Rebecca, in her meditation on the Trinity, reminded us to be mindful of our breathing. Perhaps the most ordinary thing, and yet the most life giving. The breath of God is *the* life-giving force in the creation accounts. In John's gospel the giving of the spirit is all about breathing, Jesus breathing into the disciples his risen life. The giving of the Spirit in John is all about forgiveness. In the Pentecost experience in Acts it is all about hearing one another across, ethnic, cultural and linguistic divides. In both accounts, it's all about 'seeing' the other, the ordinary, the familiar in new ways. This is the sacramental life.

The story of the woman touching the hem of Jesus' robe is among my favourites in the gospel tradition. For me it's up there with the Syrophenician woman and her sick child. Both these accounts speak to us of the overturning of the ordinary. These women were so ordinary as to be invisible. Neither were able to engage in the sacrificial rites central to the life of the Jewish people, by virtue of ethnicity or uncleanness. And the crowds, along with the disciples, were happy for them to remain that way.

These women were extraordinary, and I do wonder sometimes if Jesus himself learnt something from them. When Jesus quotes Hosea 'Go and learn what this means, I desire mercy, not sacrifice', is this something he has learnt? The account in Matthew is a bit sparse; in Luke's gospel, this story has more meat. In Luke we can feel the woman's fear at being discovered and her courage at speaking up, in the same way that the Syrophenician woman spoke up. I believe that these encounters change Jesus, as encounters like it should change us. We should see the extraordinary in the unlikely places, in the wallpaper of our lives. This is living the sacramental life.

Hosea, and Paul, both call for renewal of their faith traditions, mercy not sacrifice, faith not law. It is call that resonates down to us today. There still remains little mercy for those who are different, whose lives for countless reasons just don't fit into our narrow ordinariness or regularity. Our readings challenge us, our preconceptions about ourselves and each other, about our religion and our ethics. Our reading from Romans tells us that we are made right

with God—‘righteousness’ not through the keeping of rules, but by faith. It is a thread that runs throughout Romans. It is a bedrock of western theological thought. The problem is that we are seen by those beyond our communities not as being righteous, but as being self-righteous, standing firm in our rightness . . . and sometimes they are right!

I was amused recently to read the story of a man who gets onto a train. He was scruffy, dirty, had lipstick all over his face and a half-empty bottle of whisky in his jacket pocket. From the smell, one might have deduced that he had not seen a bath for quite some time. The carriage was crowded, and as he was well accustomed to being ostracised, he sat down next to a man in a clerical collar and started to read his newspaper. After a few minutes he turned to the priest and said ‘Father, can you tell me what causes arthritis?’ The priest saw this as an opportunity to deliver a small sermon and replied, ‘My son, arthritis is the result of sin. It is caused by not keeping oneself clean, by drinking too much and by associating with loose women. Arthritis is God’s punishment for those who turn their backs on him.’ ‘I see’ said the man and turned back to his newspaper. After a few minutes the priest had a pang of conscience and turned to the man, saying: ‘I hope I did not sound unsympathetic. How long have you had arthritis?’ ‘No problem, Father’ replied the scruffy man. ‘I don’t have arthritis. I was just reading in the newspaper that the Pope has arthritis.’

We have been confronted this morning with what living in the Spirit might mean. Or at least what it doesn’t mean. It doesn’t mean being right all the time. It does mean being open to others and the Spirit in their lives. I would suggest that the crowd gathering around Jesus would have had no idea of the issues faced by the woman; they were as invisible as she had become. It is easy to spot the upright and the conformist, those who appear ‘well.’ It is far more difficult to spot the faithful, those who are suffering silently. They are often quietly, courageously getting on, invisible. They are sacramental.

We begin our journey in ordinary time today, these days and weeks after Pentecost. The great English photographer David Bailey once said:

It takes a lot of imagination to be a good photographer. You need less imagination to be a painter because you can invent things. But in photography everything is so ordinary; it takes a lot of looking before you learn to see the extraordinary.

I hope that in this season we can have the imagination to look and learn, live sacramentally. Amen.