

A Spiritual journey – A Reflection for March Synod.

8th March 2013 – Melville.

Genesis 32:22-31, Luke 8:43-48.

The best and most inspiring of these occasional talks from presbyters have come from those or are about to retire or who passed that landmark some time ago, I wonder if I am being told something here!

I was not born into a particularly religious environment; church in my family was about hatching, matching and dispatching. As was still the cultural norm amongst British families back in the mid 60s I was baptised – according to the rites of the Church of England. I was one of a batch of babies ‘done’ one cold afternoon. Apparently I was cranky, restless and upset until the moment the water hit my head and I became quiet and docile. A sign – said the priest – of a future holiness. Yeah right! I suspect, more to the point, the water was barely above freezing and I went into shock.

Despite my lack of religious context I had a curiosity about religion as a child and a sense of the spiritual, a sense of something big just out of sight and out of reach. I had friends who did go to church and I envied them.

My formal engagement with church began when I was 16, I had not lost that sense of attraction to and curiosity with religion or the idea of God but there were other things in play. I was lonely, an introverted unsporty quiet teen; a bit of a loner at a time in life when conformity is everything. Added to this I had come to think of myself in other ways as being quite alone.

Today we stand on the verge of marriage equality, we think nothing of a lesbian or gay MP, teacher, judge, doctor, athlete or even – maybe – presbyter; it was not always so. To be in your mid-teens in an industrial town in the north of England back in the 80s and to realise you were shall we say not like the other boys was not a sudden invite to fabulousness. It was to be utterly alone. It could not end well. I think I would have rather died than people find out and that’s not hyperbole. Nothing in my context or culture said it was ok to be gay. It was this predicament that led me to church, I knew enough about Christianity to know that it was meant to be about unconditional love; off I went to find a church.

For a while I went to a Methodist Church, it had a youth group and a new minister who had spent time in the US and was very influenced by American Evangelicalism. I didn’t really fit in, the youth group was made up of young people from good church backgrounds all very sure of themselves – or so it seemed. No doubt they were, each in their own way, struggling but I didn’t have the energy to notice. Then when I said I wanted to study Theology I was roundly criticised by the minister for my questioning spirit and putting my faith at risk. Oh and by the way with all these pretty girls in the youth group why wasn’t I dating one?

As you can imagine I didn't stay.

I then encountered Catholicism. Going to Mass for the first time I felt a new sense of the presence of the sacred. It wasn't as though it was grand liturgy, it was no more high church than a regular Anglican Eucharist but the measured words, the places of silence, the symbol and ritual all spoke to me in a new way. I thought I had found my place to be and I became a Catholic.

I then went off to University to read Theology and while I was there went on retreat at a Benedictine monastery and found something of the depth and richness of the monastic tradition; I think I fell in love with it really. To this day my partner will sometimes say I should be in a monastery, I wonder what he's saying!!

When I graduated I entered the community as a novice and, a year later, took temporary vows binding for 3 years. I studied there for the priesthood and all seemed to be going well. But as time passes by we do not stand still. In the process of reflection before final vows I came to realise that part of why I was there was my own fearfulness and discomfort, and though I can't say I was free from fear I was comfortable, I was ok with me. When I disclosed this to my Abbot it was clear staying on was not a possibility. It was abundantly clear I wasn't the only Gay in the village, but it was something which went unsaid.

So I left and I went and trained as psychiatric nurse and when I qualified moved to work in a hospital in the English Midlands and quite soon met Darren – my partner – of some 18 years now. All this time I was a fairly conscientious lay Catholic of the cafeteria variety; a cafeteria Catholic (and it's a term of abuse by more conservative Catholics) hasn't the stomach for the whole menu but picks and mixes. It was possible to be passionate about what the Church said about social justice or the environment or the richness of Catholic worship but more and more people found the sexuality and gender part of the menu was unpalatable. I was becoming more and more detached, a support group for Gay Catholics I belonged to was closed by order of the bishops, then the Pope said not only would women never be ordained but the faithful couldn't even talk about the possibility – you get the picture.

The final straw came in church one day, it was the Feast of the Holy Family which is the first Sunday of January. Never my favourite day, I really did think as a kid it was called a nuclear family because a bomb might have done it some good. Anyhow on this day the priest invited married couples to stand with him in the sanctuary while he presided. I never got to see that!

In his sermon he made the observation that we shouldn't despise homosexuals – which is comforting I suppose. But he then went on to say they deserve our pity as they are mostly sad and inadequate people. This is the man who heard my confession on a fairly regular basis. What was I to think? Had he not heard that bit? Was he under the impression that

they can never be us? Well I thought I didn't want to be there anymore, I got up and walked out and joined the legion of the lapsed.

And for two years or so I was a free floating Christian, reading theological books, praying but not darkening the doors of a church. But my freedom felt like a loss, I couldn't go back but had no sense of where – if anywhere – I could be.

Of all places I found the answer in a Gay newspaper. There in the adverts of the local Gay newspaper in Dunedin was an advert for Glenaven Methodist Church. A congregation which was inclusive and welcoming, a congregation which welcomed questioning and even made space for it in a right of reply to the sermon. It seemed attractive, on paper, I remembered my initial contact with Methodism and thought again, then said well what can go wrong?

So there I went and the rest, as they say, is history.

I embraced the progressive theology of that place and the equally welcoming community out at Broad Bay, I found it was really where I had been for a long time and I thrived, we both did. Darren ended up as a parish steward and I found myself asked to preach and before too long I was a lay preacher. By that point I had begun to think about ministry, and before I could say anything other people started to ask if I would candidate. I realised that ever since I had left the monastery however successful my nursing career had been there was something unfulfilled in me. Long after I thought it would stay that way this new possibility opened up. So here I am, ordained, coming towards the end of my first ministry and preparing for whatever comes next. This has been a whirlwind tour but there are a couple of reflections I'd like to finish with.

Firstly I believe the religious life, the Christian life, is lived in the space between our two readings this evening. Between the wound of encounter with God and touching on the hem of mystery and finding life and healing. If faith means anything then wrestling with the angel of divine presence has to wound us, it deals a blow to our egos and agendas. Yet when we touch upon the hem of the mystery we find a wholeness, hope and healing, we are made well and we go in peace.

And finally some monastic advice; an old saying told to novices. *"Stay in your cell. It will teach you everything."* Now cell sounds ominous but a cell is bedroom, workshop and prayer space for a monk. The meaning of the saying is that if we cannot find God in the small things, in attentiveness to our routine and to the round of our daily lives then no practice however demanding and no place however exotic will show us God. God is here and now, in the small things, in our daily living, God is even, heaven help us, in the business of synod meetings.

Let us listen for the voice of God this evening.