

Sermon 17 July 2022 - Colossians 1:15 -28, Luke 10:38 - end



In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I don't want to work today. I enjoyed our three weeks off. I didn't want to come back to a PCC last Tuesday, and another one tomorrow, to come back to five funerals, several weddings, two baptisms this afternoon, etc. etc. I'm grumpy – so no change there, you chorus as one. So here is a “when I was on my holiday” sermon – and if you want some photos they will be on the zoom service which we'll put on youtube tomorrow.

I love Orkney, but it doesn't help that it is a long way. Although the roads flowed, there were no traffic hold ups, and we stopped last Sunday in what turned out to be a very nice café and garden centre just off the A9 near Perth – what was even better was they were just about to start serving the full Scottish roast Sunday lunch. I can't remember the last time I had a full roast Sunday lunch – so that was a treat I was not expecting.



I felt a bit guilty while on holiday. We stayed in the old croft cottage on the island of Burray, surrounded by sheep and ponies and goats and hens and guinea fowl – all cared for by Neil and Catherine, our hosts for the fortnight. Their website makes it perfectly clear that if you are going to complain about animal noises, then please go elsewhere – here you will be woken up by the sounds of the farm.



If you're like us, you will lie in bed listening to the noises of feeding time, then roll over and fall asleep again. Having worked in agricultural parishes for so much of my ministry, I know how hard those who care for animals have to work – and when you're on a farm in Orkney where the sun doesn't really set until very late at night, the working day can be very long.



Farming is not a job that makes a huge amount of money, so both Neil and Catherine have other jobs. He drives the Tesco delivery van – yes, they do have Tescos that far north – she works as a parking attendant some days, a live-in carer on others, and a welcomer for the cruise ships on others. Orkney has at least one or two cruise liners every day during the summer, and some of these boats can have a thousand passengers on board. All of whom need to be welcomed, invited to join the waiting buses, and sent off to explore the island. She said the other day she had difficulty explaining to an American couple that, no, this wasn't the place on their tour where they were going to see the Loch Ness Monster, nor visit Buckingham Palace. She also commented that once the passengers have gone, they'll be another bus for the crew – they can't of course go on the same bus. These men, mainly men, will often be people from Africa or the Far East, and they will visit the charity shops of Orkney, in the hope they can get some clothes (tea shirts etc) they can take home to their families – when they see them again in six months' or a year's time. Our world is very divided.



Of course, I mustn't feel guilty while on holiday – we are welcomed, and our money, our contribution to the economy – of the croft and the islands – is valued.



On this occasion we went to two of the outer islands – Rousay and Egilsay. The first has a population of around 200, the second about 20.



We spent the morning on Rousay so I can visit various Neolithic sites I hadn't been to, and went to Egilsay in the afternoon to be part of the story of St Magnus.



We'd caught the early ferry to Rousay – I hadn't realised that you have to reverse on to it – and at lunchtime we had our own ferry to Egilsay – it runs on request, and we had requested it.



Egilsay has one road, a public toilet by the ferry, a community centre that looked closed post-covid, a ruined church and an RSPB reserve. The ruined church is dedicated to St Magnus. A round tower and nave, both open to the sky remain, a very holy place, but not used for regular worship for many years.



We then had a walk – or in Julie's case, a roll – down the road and onto the bird reserve. It was a grey and somewhat windy afternoon, and we got back to the car, next to the church, with a couple of hours still to spare before the ferry home.



We sat in the car by the church. To say it was quiet is an understatement. You can hear the wind, the occasional bleat of a sheep on another island, and the call of the birds. So many birds.



This is where you really need your I Spy book of birds. I think there were curlews, possibly larks, but obviously far more than you normally see in the wild. It was a place to talk, to think, to pray. Lots and lots of silence apart from birds, occasionally squawking because we disturbed their peace. Away from the distractions of the world, no mobile phone signal. Away from the worries of the world, apart from making sure not to miss the last, the only, ferry home.



The obvious question is what has all got to do with anything? I think that the obvious link is with the reading from Luke introducing the sisters Martha and Mary. This is probably the first mention in the gospels of these two. Obviously we learn more about them in John chapter eleven, when they feature in the story of Lazarus, their beloved brother. There it says all three were friends of Jesus, a special reference as most of Jesus' friends had become disciples travelling with him. Maybe these women were special because they were of a household where Jesus could go and be himself, not always preaching to a crowd, not always trying to meet people's demands. In a few words, the excellence of Luke's writing creates a picture of the two women, Mary, who sits at Jesus' feet and listens to what he is saying. Martha who is distracted by her many tasks, organising what they would eat and where, perhaps a room to stay in. After all, Jesus didn't travel alone; he had an entourage who also needed feeding and offering hospitality for however long he chose to stay. I can imagine the fuss, the heat and the bother, as servants were organised and food and drink were prepared.

Finally Martha cracks. They have both welcomed Jesus into their home, but she is doing all the work. She asks Jesus to tell her sister to help, to do some of the work. Jesus gently refuses. He says that Mary has chosen the better part, to sit and listen, not to be distracted, to simply absorb what he is saying.

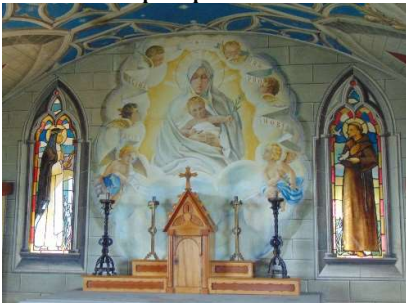
We must get the balance right. Mary was not sitting doing nothing, even though we are allowed to do that, sometimes. She was concentrating on what Jesus had to say to her, on listening to him.



We are all very good at neglecting the opportunity to sit and listen. When many of us have the equivalent of a small computer in our bags and pockets in the form of a phone, when we have a multitude of channels on our televisions, when we can listen to our exact preferred form of music and radio in every room in our house, it is tempting to fill the silence – my beloved wife does not do silence. I am a bigger fan of silence than she is – but I usually fill silence by falling asleep, or scrolling through social media, and that might not be the best use of my time either.



We also need to work. If Martha doesn't cook, they won't eat – remember what percentage of women in this world, and it is usually women, spend all their lives trying to get enough food for their families, preparing, cooking, serving. Remember as we doze in the sunshine (or the shade) over the next few days, that most people in our country do not have the luxury of time off.



In the Colossians reading we have some deep theology, who Christ is, what he means to Paul, what he should mean to all believers. Perhaps I should have given us a complicated detailed sermon unpicking all this theology, trying to get into the mystery of Christ, how that has been hidden for ages and generations, but which has now been revealed to those who believe, the “glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory”.

But actually my experience of Christ is what motivates me, and I hope your experience of Christ is what motivates you. The person, and the faith we share. We felt close to him as we sat in the church at Egilsay, pondering how faith in Jesus gave Magnus the faith to give his life for Christ, to die for peace.



We felt close to Jesus as we sat in St Magnus's cathedral on Orkney, especially when the Chapel Choir of Glasgow University filled it with beautiful music. We felt close to Jesus as we chatted about life and faith with Catherine on her croft – she was telling us that the Church of Scotland has now moved to equal marriage, and how their chapel will be welcoming its first same-sex couple for the sacrament of marriage next year. We felt close to Jesus, to the Christ who has existed before all creation, when we explored the Neolithic sites, where men and women lived before Jesus walked this world and ate with Mary, Martha and Lazarus.



This summer, whether you are on holiday, or working, or just trying to cope in the heat, find time for peace, for thinking, for living our lives in love and faith, for sharing that faith with others. Life is a privilege, a God-given privilege, so let's enjoy it. Amen.