

Sermon 17th July 2022 - St Edmunds

Colossians 1:15 -28, Luke 10:38 - end

In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit

Today I would like to talk about a place I can honestly say virtually nobody else has visited. Yes, this is a “where I went on my holidays” sponsored talk. The isle of Egilsay is only really accessible by tiny ferry from another isle which in turn is only accessible by tiny ferry from the mainland of Orkney. I am assuming that no one has access to a private helicopter here. Anyway, if the population of Orkney is 22,000, Rousay is about 200, and Egilsay is under 20. It has one road and some public toilets. And that is it. Apart from a ruined church, and a bird reserve. So, as I say, you probably haven't been there. But I have. (If you want some photos, they'll be on the zoom service, which you can watch on youtube from tomorrow).

The ruined church is dedicated to St Magnus. A round tower and nave, both open to the sky remain, and opposite is a track which leads into the bird reserve. We arrived on a grey and somewhat windy afternoon on the ferry. It's quite a logistical exercise getting there, and it involves reversing the car onto ferries and much more - apart from getting up very early for me! So was it worth it?

We sat in the car by the church, having an off-road drive of Morgan powerchair around the ruins. To say it is 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. Away from the worries of the world, apart from making sure not to miss the last ferry.

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.

I am not so sure what this says to those around Jesus. It reminds me of when Judas complained that the oil poured on Jesus' feet was too expensive, that it should have been sold and the money raised given to the poor. Jesus says that we will always have the poor, but not always have the opportunity to sit, listen, to be in his presence.

Perhaps that is the point. We sometimes neglect 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 - well, it is for me anyway. Peter is a bigger fan of silence than I am - it gives him a chance to sleep ...

In the reading from Paul's letter to the Colossians that we heard today, he writes of some difficult and complex concepts. The mystery of Christ, of God, that has been hidden for ages and generations, but has now been revealed to those who believe, the "glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory" as he calls it. It's not an easy idea. The entire letter is full of difficult concepts, Paul at his most loquacious, writing to a group of Christians who perhaps were a lot more in tune with the ideas he was speaking about, the concepts and comparisons, the turn of phrase he employed. Perhaps it is not easy to read these letters with a degree of understanding.

I think one of the things that enforced lockdown showed, and arguably the possible heat emergency now facing us over the next few days, is that there are times when life becomes quieter. Maybe everyone else seems to be away or busy, concentrating on other things. Maybe we find ourselves in a place of comparative silence, or no reason to be dashing around. Possibly that is a time when we can stop and think, be aside from the distractions of the world, and be quiet. We cannot all go to Egilsay (there isn't room on the ferry!) and there are no bookshops there for me or trains for Peter. But we can perhaps find time for peace, for thinking, for perhaps coming to terms with our lives and faith. Jesus offers us his peace. Maybe we can take it at times. Amen.