

Monday: 'X' marks the spot

The use of the phrase is much loved in pirate stories in which X on the map marks the position of the buried treasure. Today it means a location is clearly marked.

Precise locations can come to have a great significance because of what happened there. Sitting on the pew listening to the recording of MLK preaching in the Church where he preached as a minister moved me to tears. The fact that justice is central to the Jewish-Christian tradition hit home.

But it's not always the great and the good that leave such a legacy. It must be twenty-five years ago I discovered the evidence that a member of the congregation had returned to church with sandwiches and a flask for a stranger sleeping in the porch. It was ground-breaking at the time! For me, the act turned the porch into a sacred space and called others to more holy living.

A concrete and simple act of kindness, an intervention in an act of discrimination or bullying, unexpected help from those unknown to us - all can be associated with a place or what we were doing that day.

What we experience or witness in one place can inspire us and others to take action in another time and space; one person's actions, however small, can start a chain of loving action. This is the real treasure.



Tuesday: A place of spiritual connection and renewal

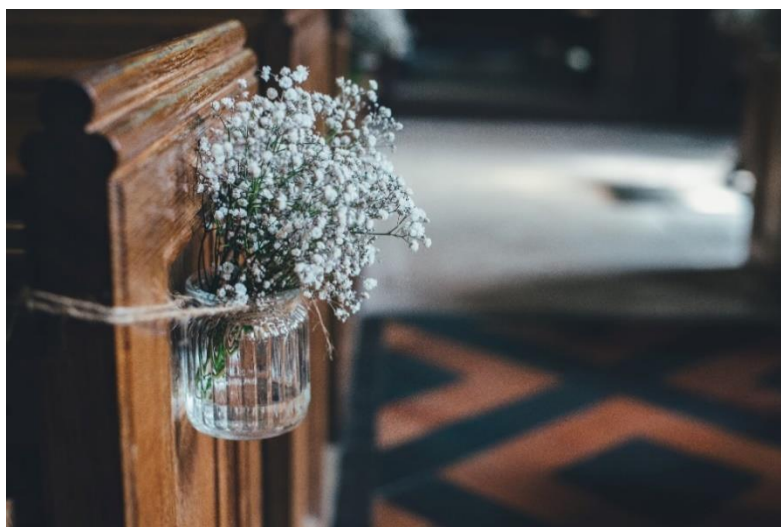
A time of 'lockdown' has made us think about the special places that we used to be able to visit relatively easily.

Often these places are wrapped up with memories of people and happy times. We may love to visit a favourite coastal walk, a beautiful garden, a bench with a view, a waterfall or a lake - each of us hold, in our heart, places of secular or religious pilgrimage. Just being there has the potential to make us feel more connected to ourselves, to the world and perhaps to a greater power behind what we understand to be the universe. It refreshes the Soul.

One of my special places is the chapel of St Peter-on-the-Wall near Bradwell, Essex. This simple, small stone building was built by the Celtic Saint St Cedd fourteen hundred years ago. The walls and the worn steps have offered a sacred space to a myriad of worshippers through the ages, a continual stream of prayer.

The Christian belief in 'The Community of Saints' is about the spiritual connection of Christians in the past, the present and those in the future, united in their worship of God and held by His love.

Many sense this in local Places of Worship where they believe there is a spiritual footprint formed by the prayers of all those who have walked before with their own personal and national challenges. Formed, too, by a cycle of births and marriages as well as the rituals of Harvest and All Souls, Christmas and Easter. We are reminded that family and community life continue through difficult times and, furthermore, the bonds are renewed and strengthened.



Wednesday: At the edge of the Sea

To stand apart from others on the beach with the waves just lapping your toes is to be in a very special place. Gazing out across the water that graduates in colour until it meets the sky is mesmerising. A feeling of insignificance is balanced by feeling significant. It seems as if we become aware of the greater picture; the rhythm of the tides governed by the gravitational pull of the moon, the mysterious occurrences of the Equinox and the Solstice twice a year. We stand on the edge of what is, not sure of what there is to see nor how far it is possible to gaze, standing on the edge of what could be, looking out to a world of possibilities.

It is easily forgotten that the sea covers over 70 per cent of the earth's surface. The unknown on earth, waiting to be explored, is on the ocean floor and in its trenches. Standing on terra firma, on the shore, seems far safer than the more enlivening but the less controllable water. Yet many people feel the pull of the sea is a call to experience more of life.

This reminds me of Jesus walking on the water towards the disciples in the boat and Peter, wanting to walk towards Jesus, finding himself sinking into the waves and calling out for help. Jesus tells Peter not to be afraid (Matthew 14. 22-33). When it comes to dealing with the bigger picture, when new experiences seem to challenge us beyond our capabilities and energies, we are not alone. Just remember to ask for a helping hand.



Thursday: Place of finality?

In the last few decades memorials seem to have regained a central place in the life of the nation. You might argue that this has always been the case. Each settlement has its own war memorial or cemetery, plaques that mark multiple deaths or battles won and, sometimes, signs or statues to the great in politics, science and the arts. Recently, it seems to have become a more regular practice for people, not directly connected, to express themselves by leaving flowers and jottings that mark the place where people have died. For many, these are places where we can sit with permission to be reflective.

Whether such places are seen by us as being peaceful, places of great pain or of individual or national distress, they nurture a reverence for life. The business of life stops and instead we are taken over by reflection upon life and death itself. Far from marking finality of life, places where human remains rest point us to the spiritual hereafter. They are a particular and peculiar blessing in that they reacquaint us with a deep knowledge of the human condition and the precious nature of life; they remind us of the need to embrace each day and make the most of our humanity.



Friday: On the summit

As a youngster, I would love the rush of exhilaration as we neared the hilltop and would discover extra energy to bound up the last section and fling myself on my back at the top. I found that looking up at the sky, with nothing but silence all around, was the most amazing feeling. No wonder mountains have an age-old association with heaven.

In the beauty of their silence, we can experience a heightened awareness of our own existence. We are physically disconnected from the world's demands and responsibilities. We might express this as pure freedom which is accompanied by an intense feeling of being alive.

Mountaineers thrive on being alone with the elements. Sometimes the thrill of the chase to the summit overtakes life itself but, as Edmund Hilary said, "Human life is far more important than just getting to the top of a mountain". Living is more than achievement.

The knowledge of our fragility made clear on the mountain range can tap into a deep need for a greater meaning to life and a hope that does not fail. On the mountain, in our acute feeling of insignificance, we become aware that everything else encircles us and there is a connection to what lies behind the purely physical; we reach out to the closeness of the Other.

Of course, we do not have to climb a special mountain to learn this, for God is to be discovered negotiating that mountain range we call life.



Saturday: My place

Nearly all of us can think of a special place which, for us as individuals, creates in us a spiritual zone of calmness, a stillness, a sense of security and well-being.

Such a space can allow us to rest our anxious minds enabling us to address the challenges of life, as well as, find strength and inspiration for and in what is to come.

By definition, this is a place where we can absolutely be ourselves without artifice or disguise. A place where we can hear the still Quiet Voice within us.

The Bible tells us that we were created to respond to the voice of God. In Genesis we are given a picture of how God intended the world to be; Adam and Eve walk in the Garden of Eden and God talks to them.

Our world can drown out this need with its noise and busyness; the call to respond to others through our responsibilities at work and at home.

Of course, we are not always able to visit our special place physicaly - even go to our Place of Worship in the time of Covid-19 - but our ultimate place to hear the Quiet Voice is within our own space; body, mind and soul.

Paul reminds us that when we enter into a relationship with Jesus the Son of God, our created bodies become a Temple of the Holy Spirit. A seat in a quiet garden or a seat on the underground train rattling along, the air 'wooshing' and the wheels screeching - there is still space for God to speak. God is with us in the walk through the countryside or in the busy queue of the supermarket.



Sunday: In others

Despite the risks of Covid-19, medics and health workers have continued to care for the sick. They know what the virus can do to a human being, still they turn up to work.

In Portland, USA, one woman's clarion call brings out 'The Wall of Mothers' who link arms and stand between the BLM protestors and the federal agents.

In Yemen, a civil war has become a proxy-war financed by outsiders. The people have little or nothing. Aid workers are regularly at risk of intimidation and are now being accused of spreading Covid-19. They know the risks, but two million children are acutely malnourished and urgently in need of life-saving food to survive.

In the 'Parable of the Sheep and the Goats', Jesus makes it clear what is required of us.

Matthew 25. 37- 40:

Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

Mother Teresa put it this way: "I see Jesus in every human being. I say to myself this is hungry Jesus, I must feed him. This is sick Jesus. This one has leprosy or gangrene; I must wash him and tend to him."

May we have eyes that see Jesus in others and be the instruments of his peace.

