



Second Sunday of Lent
Sunday 4 March 2012

Sacred Space

A sermon by Revd Katherine Hedderly

Readings: Genesis 17.1-7, 15-16; Mark 8.31-end

We recently went to dinner with a family that we have known for a long time. They are a very close family. The father Chris died just over a year ago. Over the years a good friend has painted their individual portraits. The most recent picture was of Chris's wife and two grown-up children together and the painting has only just been finished, it was the last in the series. I think we were the first ones to see it. Chris was not there to be part of that painting but he was present, behind his wife and two children grouped together, present in his portrait hanging above the fireplace that the artist had intentionally included. His was a loving presence, and the picture captured that family held together with love and commitment, across time and loss. It was the 'bigger' picture of who they were as a family. It expressed very well their love for one another. The fact that Chris commissioned it before he died, was a commitment to the love they would still hold together once he had gone. With 'Sacred Space', our theme for Lent this year, very much in my mind, I was struck by the sacred space of their relationships that they held together as a family that, no matter what, would always be a part of each of them. A sacred space that had allowed and continues to allow each of them space to be held and to flourish in their own way.

As we commit to one another in our relationships we create places where love can grow, where risks can be taken, where others can be invited in, a place that we can live from. If we honour and trust and give time to those relationships they become sacred spaces that are a source of life, as well as a place to hold death and loss. They are places that transform us. They can be found in our families, our workplaces, in our community and in the best of what it means to be the loving community of the church. Perhaps you are aware of being held or of holding others in that kind of space.

In Lent we are seeking to renew our relationship with God in love and commitment, so that it is a place that is life giving, loving, a place of transformation. In the introduction to the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent book this year, 'Love Unknown' by Ruth Burrows¹, he encourages us to 'let go of striving to be holy ourselves'. 'Jesus is our holiness' he says, 'all we can do is let him live in us'. Just the right kind of inspiration for renewing that sacred space of our relationship with him this Lent - 'to let him live in us' so that we *become* the place for his unconditional love.

But what does it mean to let Jesus live in us? Perhaps this journey of Lent is about allowing God to show us – show us where we need to de-clutter our lives, make space, enlarge our hearts and deepen our understanding – so that we can flourish in the bigger picture of his love – offered to us in the sacred space of Jesus' life and death and resurrection.

Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish woman, whose inspiring and hope filled diary and letters, written during the holocaust years before her death in Auschwitz in 1943, that we are using as inspiration for our Lent Course this year, wrote of this sacred God-filled space within, at a time when she was surrounded by the worst human suffering and evil:

'There is a deep well inside me. And in it dwells God. Sometimes I am there too. But more often stones and grit block the well and God is buried underneath. Then he must be dug out again.'

¹ "Love Unknown", Ruth Burrows OCD, Continuum, 2011

These weeks are about doing that work and connecting to that hope-filled life.

Peter who we hear challenging Jesus, and being challenged by him, in our Gospel reading is having to do this kind of work as he struggles to take on board the full extent of what living life with Jesus is really all about. What it means to make space for him and follow him as a disciple.

A moment ago he had the clarity of sight and understanding to recognise Jesus as the Messiah. Now, as Jesus opens up what it really means - the suffering and humiliating death that he faces at the hands of others – Peter can't take it. He doesn't have room for this kind of Messiah. He wants the Jesus he knows, who 'fits' in his life. There's no space for his failure and death.

But Jesus' rebuke summons Peter to let go and open his life and heart and mind to something new. Along with the other disciples he is called to trust and allow this Jesus, who heals and brings life and peace *and* who will suffer and die, to live in him. To set his mind on the things of God, to trust and let go of his own limited perspective. Open his life to the transforming power of Jesus' Passion and self-giving love.

It is only in letting go and learning to live with *this* Jesus that he will find the way to life - the bigger life that Jesus' death holds out to the world. As he does this Peter is not embracing death but enlarging the space and understanding within him where God can come and live and grow. Allowing 'Love Unknown' to live in him and show him the way to life. At the Sea of Galilee Jesus' words to him had been an invitation to come and follow and learn – a simple invitation to a journey of discovery. Now the call is deeper and stronger. 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'

Jesus' words offer the same deeper call to us. To make space for the mess we are so aware of in the world around us, the burdens we see others carrying, those we carry ourselves, and in following Jesus through his own journey of suffering, be transformed by the greater truth – the unknown deeper love - that God holds for us. Allow Jesus' holiness to be the sacred life and space within us – transforming all these experiences of the cross, with unconditional love and offering life and hope in the midst of it all.

A sacred space that can hold 'love unknown'; the suffering of the people of Homs in Syria praying for the violence to end, that creates within us a hunger to see justice done; that continues to work for dialogue in our church that opens the way for real equality and sacred space for all; that will remember our friend who is depressed and give words of encouragement and help to lead them through it; that acknowledges where we have denied love and seeks to make amends; that holds our own suffering and allows God to show us where there is life in it; a place where we know Christ's encouragement to hold the bigger picture of our world for one another. Allow the life and death and resurrection of Jesus to be lived in us.

In David Hockney's 'A Bigger Picture' exhibition at the Royal Academy, he has painted a series called Tunnels, where he has returned again and again, to the same winding tree-lined track in his much loved East Yorkshire landscape, drawn back to paint it as the seasons change. The barrenness and death of winter, with bare branches and a hard frozen snowy track and a cold sky sits alongside the fresh grass, leaves and life of spring, the rich overblown heaviness of summer and the burnt leaves of autumn. Seen together the pictures in these different seasons hold a bigger picture of that place – full of life and hope that makes you want to be out in nature, and longing for spring. The images of winter and barrenness and the journey of death from autumn inform how you view and appreciate spring and the fullness of summer. They are held together.

Our time of Lent is a time for us to make space in our lives for Jesus' suffering and death – allow him to *dwell in us* and in this sacred space open our eyes the scale of God's overflowing and unconditional love for us and for our world.

To deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him – down the winding tree-lined track that he invites us to follow down in all weathers.