

Sermon Trinity 9 Sunday 6/8/2023

Isaiah 55: 1-5; Psalm 145; Romans 9: 1-5; Matt 14: 13-21

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen

Amen

I have a friend who visited the island of Iona off the west coast of Scotland. It is a remote and an austere place, and as she described it to me, 'a thin place'. That is a wonderful way of capturing a place where there is a real sense of nearness to the divine, to the miraculous, to something beyond our normal, every-day human normality. It speaks of a place of palpable spirituality. In recent weeks, I have visited the old Cistercian Abbey at Mellifont and the monastery at Glendalough. What is striking about both of those places is their deep tranquillity and spirituality. That descriptor 'a thin place' springs very quickly to mind. There is a sense of the peace and presence of the divine in such places – they embody the spiritual.

I think we in the 21st century West tend to be less aware of spiritual presence, nearness of God, of 'thin places', than were our ancestors, or indeed, than are people across many other parts of today's world. We are a lot quicker to avoid talking about spirituality in public for fear of blank looks or mockery. Ask me to spell out the reasons for the spiritual essence of Mellifont or Glendalough, and I would struggle to explain exactly why they are 'thin places' in terms of hard facts. We need to explain in hard, provable facts and to measure objectively in order to accept the truth or reality of our experiences.

I refer to us as STEM people. STEM stands for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. While many of us in this church are not experts in any of these areas, the concepts fundamental to STEM are embedded in the way we think. We have learned to look for facts, to be objective and to focus on observable and provable material reality. If we are to accept that something is true, then we have to be able to prove it, using hard and measurable facts. That means that we can struggle to make sense of the spiritual. We cannot help but to apply that same STEM lens in how we approach faith, the life of Jesus and the divine mysteries.

We are directly confronted with the difficulties a STEM approach brings when we hear stories of the miracles of Jesus. We heard of the feeding of the crowd with 5 loaves and 2 fish in today's Gospel. The first desire of people steeped in a STEM approach is not to marvel at the greatness of God and give thanks to him for his sustaining faithfulness. Neither is it to use such stories to explain how we experience and know God. Instead, STEM people tend to start by asking for proof and trying to figure out the technicalities of how the feeding of a huge crowd with 5 loaves and 2 fish could possibly have happened, and to prove or disprove that it is true.

In spite of my years of theological study and ministerial experience, and in spite of my own professed faith as a Christian, I too am a STEM child. Miracles give me pause for thought; they present me with a problem. If I could avoid preaching about them I probably would. I wonder at the fact that those great teachers of the past – brilliant people of great faith like

Origen, Augustine, Aquinas, Nicolas of Lyra, along with the great thinkers of the Reformation – can have read of, and taught faithfully about the miracles of Jesus without trying to make what I call STEM-sense of them.

So in order to prepare this sermon, I undertook some study of my own. I needed to understand how those early theologians and other great minds of the Christian church have made faithful sense of the problem of miracles. I needed to understand the difference between their and my understanding of truth, and to reflect on how my understanding may be overly influenced and limited, by seeing the world through a STEM lens.

What I learned from a number of days of reading and reflection was as follows. The great Christian thinkers and teachers, all the way from the early Church to key Reformation figures, tended to accept miracles such as the feeding of the crowd in one of two ways. On the one hand, if they accepted miracles as factual truth, they argued that these inexplicable events signposted or reflected the divinity of Christ and that the usual laws of nature do not necessarily apply when there is divine intervention. On the other hand, those who regarded such miraculous events as allegorical used them to teach about aspects of the nature of God and the divinity of Jesus. For example, the story of the miracle of the feeding of the crowd enabled them to connect Jesus with Moses and God's intervention to feed the Children of Israel in the desert.

It was only when we arrived at the Scientific era from the end of the 17th century (in other words, the start of the time of STEM) that there began to be a problem with miracles, because now there was a need to explain such events rationally. For example, Paulus explained the feeding of the great crowd by adding to the existing narrative, claiming that the wealthy people in the crowd must have been inspired by Jesus to share the food they had brought with them, even though this was not in the text. Others wrote off such stories as being unimportant to the Gospel narrative of Jesus and thus avoided having to explain the problem at all – they argued that these were simply myths that had somehow got added into the original, historically-accurate Gospel stories so could just be ignored. All of this fudging and rationalisation has left us with the problem we have today with miracles.

So where did all my research and reflection leave me? Ultimately, I have come to the conclusion that the age of STEM has actually diminished our human understanding of truth. We have boxed and limited truth to that which can be rationally and scientifically explained and proven beyond doubt. This leaves us with no vocabulary, no concepts to handle simple things like feeling the spirituality or ‘thinness’ of a sacred place. It leaves us with no way to make sense of the miracle stories such as Jesus feeding the great crowd. Ultimately, it leaves us with no way to make sense of the resurrection of Jesus – which is the central tenet of our Christian faith.

STEM thinking leaves us bereft of imagination, of spiritual intelligence and of trust in our faith. It tries to shrink the Almighty a manageable size for the human mind, to put him in a matchbox and lock him away where we can control God. We are called as people of faith to move outside the limitations of STEM thinking, to trust our emotions, our spiritual antennae, to learn about God and about ourselves through stories, to 'let ourselves go' into the unknowable in faith. And I am the first to acknowledge that this is not an easy thing to do, but it is worth trying. If we remain hemmed in by STEM thinking, we stop our faith growing and deepening.

Let us pray

Loving God, who has given us the gift of wonderful stories in Scripture to help unlock for us the mysteries of our faith, bless us with the capacity to reach beyond the box of our limited human certainties and to accept that we do not need to explain everything around us in human terms in order to experience and know your infinite love and goodness. **Amen**