

Close to God

January 2023

Have there been times in your life when you have thought “This life cannot be all there is! There must be more – something beyond our day to day routine.”

Maybe you have been listening to a sublime piece of music that has stirred your very soul and you were thinking and feeling “Wow – where did that come from!”

Maybe you have been transfixed by some overpowering grandeur in nature and you have felt like falling on your knees.

Maybe you have witnessed some act of love or heroism or sacrifice that goes far further than what we might expect normally and you say “What drove that person to do that, to go that far. What inspired that person, that hero to act in such an extraordinary way?”

Maybe you have been staggered when the intricate detail and design of our world has been revealed to you by some specialist or by some commentary or TV program and you have said “Surely such grand creation cannot have arisen from molecules randomly bashing and crashing into each other!”

Have you ever had an experience when you have thought to yourself “I am truly meant to be here” And that experience might be good and fulfilling but also it might be at a difficult time, maybe even at a tragic time, a time when you are called to help.

Then maybe you have been having glimpses of the beyond, maybe you have felt that there are forces operating in this life that are far from the mundane and secular – forces that point to a vision of higher things beyond our ken.

There are quite a few accounts of people having “near-death” experiences. In these accounts, those recovering relate things that suggest that they have had glimpses of a world beyond. The cynics would maintain that all of this is induced by the heavy use of drugs on the dying patient – and no doubt this would be true in many cases. But there remain instances where the person recovers and relates facts, meetings and experiences that they could not possibly have known about beforehand and are not explicable in terms of a mind mangled by the heavy use of drugs.

The Bible is full of accounts where people have had dreams in which God has communicated to them telling them what to do, where to go, whom to see. We can think of Joseph, Daniel, David and Ezekiel, Mary and Joseph, the wise men, Peter and Paul. These dreams or visions feature strongly in both the New and

Old Testaments, describing times when God has broken into the routine world of people to give guidance, strength and purpose. And if God has done this in the past there is no reason why he cannot do it again even in this modern day and age. And if you look at the movers and shakers down through the ages you can see that he has done just that on many occasions.

The disciples around Jesus must have witnessed these glimpses quite often when seeing him perform miraculous acts that they couldn't begin to understand.

It is easy to think that Jesus was just a wise man and many do! A sage, a seer a guru or maybe even a prophet – just like so many others we have heard about, read about and maybe even seen ourselves down throughout the ages.

But the Bible will not let us leave it at that – recounting miracle after miracle. In addition there are cases when there is some very tangible message from the heavens endorsing Christ and his ministry on earth.

First, there was the case of Jesus' baptism where we read
“At that moment heaven opened and Jesus saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased”

And this was a voice, presumably heard by all who were present showing that this was a “thin space” in which God was very near.

And, as we read this morning, there was a second case on the Mount of Transfiguration, when Jesus was up there with Peter, James and John in the company of Moses and Elijah representing the law and the prophets from olden days. . And this event was important enough to be recorded in all three Gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke.

“A bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said this is my Son whom I love. With him I am well pleased. Listen to him!”

There is no doubt that the disciples were shattered and awestruck by this unnerving experience to the point where Peter garbles and tries to say something sensible suggesting they construct three shelters without any obvious purpose – because, as Luke comments, “he did not know what to say”

Of course the disciples couldn't stay up on that mountain forever bathing in this unearthly, ghostly and very frightening experience. They literally had to “come

back down to earth” and come down from that mountain and get back into the hurly burly of everyday living

Mind you they would never be quite the same again after that experience!

Peter relating the incident later in his second epistle says

“and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with him on the holy mountain”

It is interesting that Jesus tells them not to breathe a word of this to anyone; as he often did after healing someone miraculously. For Jesus, the priority was not the spectacular nor the flashy but the quiet working of God’s grace through whichever channel was appropriate – and Jesus was most certainly a channel of God’s grace.

There was another instance when God was very close, as Jesus was preparing to head to Jerusalem for the last time – and to face what he knew lay ahead.

Jesus was unsettled by all the events and all the prospects closing in on him. In John Chapter 12 we read:-

"Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. ²⁸Father, glorify your name!" Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." ²⁹The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him. ³⁰Jesus said, "This voice was for your benefit, not mine.

So there was a booming voice which was unmistakable, coming from above – from heaven. Note this was not a quiet urge, an internal feeling, or a figment of the imagination, but a voice that thundered, a voice that everyone heard and there was no doubt, there was no mistake. Some thought that it might have been an angel but they all heard it all right!

All these instances indicate that God was very close in these events, they were not normal but they were very real! These were the “Thin Spaces” talked about in Celtic culture.

There is something rather convincing about the public aspect of these occurrences. It wasn’t just an individual having a flight of fancy, there were others who could corroborate or deny these events.

In our fast modern society, rushing to meet deadline after deadline we may be too frantic to hear God's still small voice speaking to us.

There is so little room for God in today's secular, selfish and cynical society.

Maybe we need to be quiet and remove the distractions so that our soul will be receptive to the nourishment of God's Holy Spirit.

I suppose that that is what prayer really is, quietly listening for God's voice, God's wisdom. God's perspective, God's guidance, God's strength, God's nourishment.

Maybe you have had times when you have felt God particularly close to you – perhaps even enveloping you.

Have you ever had an urge to sacrifice something dear and important to you so that someone whom you love can have just a little happiness?

Maybe you have had a flash of inspiration or understanding that came from left field – totally unexpected!

Maybe you have felt an urge, a drive, to do something no matter what the cost, because it feels so right.

Maybe, you too have had glimpses of the beyond and you are feeling and seeing dimly into a world that lies beyond. A world close to |God. Thin Places!

Amen