

TRINITY 17'24

I think it is a special line to end on when, in our Epistle today, James says, "Draw near to God and he will draw near to you."

Yesterday, being St Matthew's day, it would be a good summary of his journey from tax collecting to becoming a close disciple. Or St Augustine, whose wonderful prayer we have already used – "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you."

I like the sense of expectation here and urgency even, about the presence of God and how compelling that can be. I think we experienced it on our Quiet Day this year and it would be worthwhile to reflect and talk about that some more together. So often we assume that a life of prayer and worship often seems all the same or too much like routine; perhaps that's true, sometimes. But when you think more deeply about being attracted to God's presence, and drawn in, everything is about 'encounter' and meeting our Lord... in Word and Sacrament certainly, but also meeting Him in the gift of one another's company and friendship, meeting him in the different calling and challenges he presents to us, when we are really listening.

In our Gospel today there seems to more bickering going on than listening! The disciples were being competitive like we all were with our own siblings. I say 'were' but some of us are still bickering; I often come across this when preparing to lead a funeral and I discover that families fall out; that this brother or sister will not be coming to the funeral because old

wounds have not been healed. Sadly I have had many conversations with grieving families who say ‘what if so and so’ turns up...and yes, I have even seen a fight break out in a crematorium! No, our Biblical authors are suggesting something radically different.

When we come into the presence of God, when we light a candle or kneel down, when we are on our own or, in a vibrant congregation, imagine Jesus or Mary sitting beside you. You can say whatever is on your mind, whatever is on your heart, speaking as one friend to another. The Christian life is all about those moments of intimacy as well as discovery; moments when we really ‘connect’ with the divine in the everyday, wherever that may be.

Some of you will know that Liz and I were very high up in the glens of Scotland last week for a family wedding and it was one of those non-religious ceremonies in a posh hotel – with screeching bagpipes instead of any hymns, and quite a few tartan kilts and lots of jolly Celtic dancing. But the highlight for me was our three year old niece ‘palling up’ with another girl her own age, and just enjoying everything – they were sharing a plastic computer, of course, but also visiting every table, saying hello to everyone, dancing manically, and being thoroughly spoilt.

Without getting too sentimental, it is as if they haven’t yet learnt what inhibitions are. Everything is out there to encounter and enjoy! I am sure that is what the last few lines of today’s Gospel reading are reminding us...that in all our

relations with God, he welcomes us in to meet Him, and embraces every part of us, even the quirkiest or most annoying parts of us.

“Draw near to God and he will draw near to you.”

I'd like to end with this prayer, simply called: 'The Presence of God' –

“Bless all who worship you, almighty God,
from the rising of the sun to its setting:
from your goodness enrich us,
by your love inspire us,
by your Spirit guide us,
by your power protect us,
in your mercy receive us,
now and always. Amen.”