

J.D. Ousley
Sermon—14Jan18
Annual Meeting
“Thin Places”

In the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. Amen.

“We live in troubled times.”

How often we hear people say that!

Of course, it could also be said that we have *always* lived in troubled times! There is rarely a period in history which isn't marked by some degree of conflict.

But still, there are periods when a society lacks a common perspective on what its citizens stand for and what they want to accomplish.

During such times, the faith of the nation may also seem to be declining. People don't share common goals. They are worried about all sorts of things. And so they don't seem to have the time or inclination to seek guidance from organized religion.

This seems to have been the case in America in the early 1800's. The country was exhausted from the war of independence with Britain. America was a new nation that was just starting to find its way.

At the time, little attention was being given to religion. A poll of a graduating class of Harvard in those days revealed that just 3 men out of a hundred said that they believed in God. It was only after two “Great Awakenings”—major religious revivals—later in the nineteenth century that America became a nation where the majority of its citizens professed a faith.

A lot of people might speculate that our culture is at a similar low point today. Public pronouncements by religious leaders are routinely ignored; fewer people find time to attend church.

We can surely understand a remark that occurs in today's First Lesson. The author is commenting on the time in which the Prophet Samuel lived, around 900 BC., and he says that, “The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.”

“The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.” We don't seem to be living in a time of religious ferment!

Yet even if visions aren't common, people still need ultimate values to live by. One proof of this need is a phenomenon that is often observed in America today: while many people remain uninterested in what they think of as “religion,” they still express a keen interest in “spirituality.” If organized religion may not be terribly popular among many of our citizens, it does seem to be the case that many of the spiritual *practices* of religion command attention.

My favorite example of this interest in the spiritual is the *meditation techniques* that were developed over the centuries in Christianity and other religions.

Meditation is now taught in corporations to reduce stress among employees. Hospitals recommend it to heart patients. Doctors claim that there is scientific evidence that it contributes to one's physical and mental health. (As it happens, the Associate Rector and I will be looking at meditation and other spiritual practices in the Christian tradition during a special project we have planned for this upcoming Lent.)

So, too, even though the numbers of monks and nuns are declining throughout the Western world, monasteries and convents that are still open are popular places. They offer

retreats for clergy and laypeople, and the monks and nuns often find that these events are booked solid with people seeking peace and quiet and escape from the stress of modern life.

God is everywhere, of course. But humans, being human tend to find God in particular places. Historic shrines like the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham or Lourdes in France — these places of pilgrimage are welcoming record numbers of visitors.

This *spirituality of place* has a long history in our Anglican tradition. The most ancient expression of Christianity in the British Isles was the Celtic (or “Seltic”) tradition; it is present to this day in Ireland and Scotland.

Celtic religious practices taught a reverence for nature that was inherited from British pagan religions. Celtic Christians liked to talk of “*thin places*.”

Thin places were locations where people were especially likely to feel the presence of God. There might be a well that felt sacred. Or, entering a particular grove of trees, people might feel they were able to detect the holy beyond this world.

Many people today have their own thin places. For members of Incarnation, this church building can be a sacred site. Just coming into our building and sitting here can be calming. When the church is open during the lunch hour, there is a steady stream of people who might not consider themselves religious but who still stop in and light a candle or sit in church.

As I think of other thin places for me personally, I would recall a beach on the west coast of Florida where I went to watch the sunset. When I’m in New York City, I sometimes get a spiritual boost when I walk along the East River, and I look at the waves, and I see the light dancing on the water.

For many of us, Central Park would count as a thin place. We feel uplifted when we walk through the park on a sunny day and enjoy looking at its trees and ponds and pathways.

I don’t mean to make exaggerated claims about these places. They don’t lead me to see visions of angels! But when I’m there, I do feel closer to God.

So people have a remedy when visions are lacking. They can look for holy places where they could feel close to the sacred.

After all, Christianity is an incarnate religion. It is a faith that is lived in space and time. As far as space is concerned, we will each have thin places where our faith is lived—some places will mean more to us than others.

While “spirituality” is a vague concept, Christian spirituality which is enlivened by the spirit of Christ in this world is quite specific. We are to love God in all the blessings of life, and we are to serve Christ in our neighbors. We Christians believe that God can appear in our world—in our lives.

“The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.”

But even in an era when visions are rare, we can be inspired by places. On this day of the Annual Meeting, we may especially give thanks for our own sacred space, for this church where we are blessed to worship.

May we continue to be good stewards of the heritage that has been passed down to us. And may we help others who seek to renew their spirits in this place.

Amen.