**#35 St John’s Evensong 7.11.21**

**Micah 4: 1-5**

**4**In the last days

the mountain of the Lord’s temple will be established
    as the highest of the mountains;
it will be exalted above the hills,
    and peoples will stream to it.

**2**Many nations will come and say,

“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
    to the temple of the God of Jacob.
He will teach us his ways,
    so that we may walk in his paths.”
The law will go out from Zion,
    the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
**3**He will judge between many peoples
    and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide.
They will beat their swords into plowshares
    and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not take up sword against nation,
    nor will they train for war anymore.

Everyone will sit under their own vine
    and under their own fig tree,
and no one will make them afraid,
    for the Lord Almighty has spoken.
**5**All the nations may walk
    in the name of their gods,
but we will walk in the name of the Lord
    our God for ever and ever.

**Philippians 4: 6-9**

**6**Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. **7**And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

**8**Finally, beloved,[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Philippians%204:6-9&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-29434a)] whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Philippians%204:6-9&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-29434b)] these things. **9**Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Despite the excellence of the company here tonight, I would give my eye teeth to be in the Alps right now.

Almost any reference to mountains, sends me off to what you might call my happy place. The prophet Micah has taken me straight there. So, the Alps – Swiss or Austrian, I’m not fussy really.

My concept of a ‘happy place’ has changed over the years. A happy place I now link with what our Celtic Tradition refers to as a ‘thin place’ – a moment where the veil between ourselves and God feels tissue-paper thin; a place where the *intensity* of God’s peace truly passes all understanding, and where hearts and minds are helplessly and joyfully in Christ Jesus.

I remember feeling that I had indeed gone up to the Mountain of the Lord in the hills above Obergurgl, in the Austrian Tyrol. Obergurgl – further up the valley from Untergurgl, as you can imagine – is the highest parish in Austria; when you get off the bus there, and you are already at 2000 metres, and cable cars and paths take you higher. It was on a hike upwards, towards the Ramolhaus at 3006 metres that I felt the place - as well as the air – thinning around me.

Its easy to see and feel God, here. When you get a sunny day, when you’ve walked for miles, made new friends, and now you stop for lunch (ham and cheese rolls, it *IS* Austria) and look out at this Creation that God has given, its hard not to be overwhelmed by the presence of grace in creation.

I celebrate the awe and wonder of creation here, through the sounds – of water, of overheard events happening far across the valley, of feet walking along tracks, sound travels far in the mountains – and the smells, the freshness of the air, the flowers and the grasses. It’s creation in superabundance. Reverence for God’s creation is triggered by a **realisation and a reception, consciously**, of what we are given by this grace.

And therein lies a danger –am I reading the realisation of what we are given in creation into just feeling good on holiday?

Let’s test this out with another view of the world. I give you…a multi-story carpark in Stratford on Avon. In contrast to the mountains above Obergurgl, and the effortless grace that creation grants there, how does this measure up?

The breeze-block cathedral of Bridgefoot carpark, where I parked every day for 20 years when I worked at the Theatre in Stratford isn’t, on the face of it, anything to write home about. But I can’t get away from the certainty that these materials were once a cliff; *He still made it*; it is as *given* as any Alpine valley is. Why do we have degrees of creation? – God made it, and who am I to reduce anything He made?

And, just as one of the Eucharistic prayers talks of transformation by the work of human hands, so that transformation has happened here – even more so; Creation is still inherent in these breezeblocks. If you think this way, you might see with joy God’s hand in the fall of a leaf, or in the flight of a sparrow, or a brick wall. The Gospel of Thomas 77 says “*Split a piece of wood, and I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there."* Which, in some views, is very nearly a heresy, but we’re all friends here, right?

This perception is all fine for people who want to find God - but how about those who don’t?

I like to run. When we lived in Kidderminster, I used to run along the banks of the Severn from Bewdley to Arley. One day, approaching Arley, a tree had fallen across the way. As I approached, I thought, I can hurdle this, but as I approached more, I thought, oh, I dunno though.

And so I stopped. At that point, when the water is low, some rocks protrude; and, *because* I had stopped, I heard the water flowing over the rocks. The water hissed, and spat and crackled; and, as I then lumbered on, I was struck by the sheer beauty of the sound that God has created. And, it was disproportionate – its just water on rocks, but the beauty of the sound stayed with me. And I wondered what it was that had such an effect, why *this* might be a thin place. Gradually, I realised that I was perceiving that sound in creation as a gift from God. But grace – in a sound? Why not? “in him all things hold together.”

So I christened the place *The Sound of Grace* *Rocks*. The realisation of creation as a grace given was brought home to me – it’s just the sound of water on rocks, but it’s given, given in abundance…and He made it.

In those days, I used Social Media, and I posted a photo of the place online. Three friends asked me why I called the place *The Sound of Grace* *Rocks*; I replied that I felt the vastness of God’s gifts of creation in a miniscule sound in this place; and that this realisation of the abundance of Creation had sustained me.

So, sometime later, somehow, I found myself at the SOGR, with those 3 atheists, friends who had been moved by the way God had expressed his Creation to me, and who wanted to try to see for themselves. Although of uncertain faith, they asked me to pray in thanksgiving for creation, and for our friendship that this expression of creation had renewed. I’m not sure any of them was converted necessarily – but every now and then, one of them, who lives high up on the river near to the source of the Severn, emails me a photo when the Severn floods and says “this is all heading to the Sound of Grace”; two other friends are now back at home in Slovakia, preparing for their first child to be born, but they still ask me about the SOGR; they sent me a photo of them in the Tatras mountains, and they called it “our creation in grace”.

So, the mysteries of grace and of thin places abound; our world seems so full of conflict, so unable to accept the revealed grace that is all around us. If we can *perceive and share* God’s grace, then our world might find it easier to beat spears into pruning hooks and to live in truth, honour, justice, purity, to make us truly alive in this world that is excellent and worthy of praise.

How do we do it? Back in Philippi, it was said ‘Keep on doing the things that you have *learned and received and heard and seen in me*, and the God of peace will be with you.’

It’s got to be worth a try.

Amen