Sermon – Lent 2 All Saints

I wonder if you know the author of these lines…

*“Look at the stars! Look, look up at the skies!*

*O look at all the fire-folk sitting in the air!*

*The bright boroughs, the circle-citadels there!*

These are the opening lines of “The Starlight Night” by Gerard Manley Hopkins, the Victorian poet and Jesuit priest. In his journal he gives an insight into his inspiration for this verse:

“As we drove home the stars came out thick: I leant back to look at them and my heart, opening more than usual, praised our Lord to and in whom all that beauty comes home”.

This reflection on the starlit sky leads Manley Hopkins to reflect on the nature of the world as a prize, to be received with prayer, patience, alms and vows, all of which – with an allusion to Bethlehem, he describes as the **barn within which is Christ.**

I love that image of the world as a barn within which is Christ – and what better themes for Lent than prayer, patience, alms and vows.

One of the things I miss from living in the countryside, are our night skies. More than once I rushed outside and up the garden, away from the PIRs, to simply gaze in wonder at the world about which we know so little.

As is so often the case, the Psalmist can put into words, what our hearts cannot: *“The heavens are telling the glory of God and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech and night to night declares knowledge”.*

Lowering our eyes to our own level in daytime, I wonder why we find it so much more difficult to gaze in wonder at the day time world; filled as it is, with equally unfathomable wonders of creation. We find plentiful excuses for our inattention: our busyness, our distractions, our commitments, our sense of self-absorption.

The Christian tradition has long recognised that creation – as well as scripture – is revealing of God’s nature. St Paul understood this, writing clearly in Romans:

*For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.*

Abram found his excuse for being inattentive to God – his sense of inadequacy mixed with guilt and perhaps remorse for not having a son, except for Ishmael, born of Hagar his wife’s slave. And so, God drags Abram outside and shows him the sky – look, he says, you will have more descendants than the stars in the sky, trust me!

This is the first time that Abram has spoken to God. Until now Abram has been silently compliant – but now after years of obedience, Abram’s frustration boils over. The result is a new covenant between God and Abram sealed in what for us is a somewhat bizarre and cruel ritual, but one which holds echoes of Pentecost fire too.

From that day onwards our relationship with God changes both in the biblical narrative and in terms of our relationship with God today.

Human discourse with God shifts from passive obedience to frank and honest argument, debate and doubt. And God’s work in the world becomes one of covenant, marked by a reciprocal partnership in which we play a responsible part in creating the Kingdom, alongside God.

And all of this becomes possible, because God showed Abram how to see the work of the divine in nature.

So, what can we take from this for our Lenten journey of faith?

There is an implicit challenge in the story of Abram to remain faithful, to persevere. We see this reflected in the gospel reading too as Jesus rejects the temptation to fall in step with the Pharisees and continues instead with his mission.

Perseverance is implicit in Lenten discipline of course, and yet it takes many forms other than the discipline to refrain from something or to commit to something.

There is also a more general perseverance that we need if we are to remain attentive to the workings of God – to ensure that significant encounters with the divine – our starlit nights – do not pass by unexamined and unappreciated.

And alongside perseverance, sits patience; the ability to dwell in God’s time not mortal time. Spiritual patience is more than simply recognising that some things take a long time to work out. It is about believing that truth and justice will be victorious regardless of everything that appears to get in the way.

I’ve refrained from mentioning the war until now, leaving you to make the connections between peaceful starlit skies and fear filled missile ones. Like a glass panel above an internal door, our peace is currently a borrowed light; time will tell whether our peace is at the expense of the present in Ukraine or the future here.

We need actively engaged perseverance and patience to overcome these dreadful events that don’t simply change lives but define them too.

To a greater or lesser extent of all us live in the shadow of our own corporate and individual injustices, our own crosses, both inherited and contemporary, and all of us yearn for the day of resurrection when justice will finally silence the tortuous pain that is currently defying all attempts at human healing.

Justice in this world is a rare commodity, but faith is plentifully available, to all who persevere with patience to notice the workings of God in creation, in love, in one another.

If this Lent your lives feel more absent of hope than normal then remember that all the great characters of the biblical narrative, Jesus included, have been on this same journey already. There is nothing new under the sun.

But also take a leaf out of Abram’s book and step outside on a starlit night; soak up the utter otherness of the worlds beyond our reach and in the solitude of the night know afresh that you are known and loved by the One who makes it all possible. And thereby may you discover your perseverance and patience renewed.

“Trust in the Lord with all your might, and be not wise in your own sight”.

Amen.