

Talk One – March 13th 2019

The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet:

“I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way”—
“a voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.’”

And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, and he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him. (Mark 1:1-13)

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The most frequent word in this opening passage from Mark’s gospel – is “wilderness.” In this opening talk I want to think about what ‘wilderness’ might mean for us as we go through

Lent, the time when we reflect upon, recall and try to live through those forty days our Saviour spent in the desert.

It's a dangerous place, a testing place – full of wild animals; where Satan appears *to* Jesus. But it's also where John comes *from*; it's in the wilderness that we are called to make straight paths for our Redeemer. It's where angels come to minister.

I want to think about this wilderness as the first of our Gaps – where, like John, like Jesus – we are tested, confronted, but also where we encounter our call. *After* the crowds at his baptism, and *before* the crowds of his coming ministry – Christ finds himself alone. The wilderness marks a gap – in his life.

Lent is a gap.

And gaps are bad news. Gender pay gaps, funding gaps, glaring gaps in global and national wealth distribution: gaps are shortfalls and inequalities. We want to close gaps.

I remember once during a school play a disaster occurred backstage. One of the actors had missed his cue and – following a desperate search – was nowhere to be found. At a loss, the audience was waiting expectantly. There was a long uncomfortable gap. What to do? One of the other actors made a decision. He walked onto the stage, under the lights. Stood right at the front and looked out for a long time at the audience. Then – very deliberately – he opened a packet of crisps. He proceeded for a full five minutes just to stand there, munching his way through the packet. It brought the house down – massive applause. I've never forgotten it. He didn't close the gap – he made a virtue of the gap.

I want to make a virtue of the gap.

The phrase “God of the gaps” is used dismissively by some secularists to describe a God “in retreat.” According to these thinkers, we only resort to God in a scientific age when we can't explain the increasingly rare *gaps* in our knowledge.

Gaps are where explanation runs out – and that’s a disaster. Or is it? Gregory of Nyssa (c.325 – c.395), one of the most brilliant and imaginative of the Early Church Fathers, criticises us for always needing to know, to pin things down, to have explanations and answers. We’re like children trying to grasp a sunbeam. We are called he said – not always to understand, but to adore.

The wonderful American poet Mary Oliver, who died last year, writes about coming across a whale bone washed up on a beach. She says:

Though I play at the edges of knowing,
truly I know
our part is not knowing,
but looking, and touching, and loving.¹

Far from being always bad news, gaps, wildernesses are precious spaces.

There’s a crack in everything,
that’s how the light gets in.²

sings Leonard Cohen.

Our lives are better, more painful perhaps, but richer for the cracks, the gaps. A life without gaps wouldn’t be a human life any more than a comb without gaps would be useful to a hairdresser.

So, in these talks I want to explore the idea of a God who inhabits and shares the gaps, the in-between spaces of our lives and communities, the Lent times, the waiting. And as a guide for our exploring, we’ll take St. Mark with us, whose own gospel is full of gaps and interruptions and questions – and is all the richer for it. In many ways, Mark’s is a gospel of the gaps, where the light gets in.

¹ Mary Oliver, “Bone” in *Why I Wake Early*, (Boston: Beacon, 2004), 5-6

² Leonard Cohen, “Anthem”

All around the eastern Mediterranean in the third, fourth and fifth centuries – around the time Gregory of Nyssa was writing and working as a bishop in Cappadocia, many women and men found themselves called to follow Christ out into the wilderness. They chose to live away from the metropolitan centres, out in the deserts of Syria, Palestine, and especially in Egypt. Their aim was to come close to God in the silence and the emptiness of the desert. If we cannot know God's essence, they seem to say, we can at least stand in God's place – on the high mountain, in the lonely desert.³

This evening, I want to think about this journey – out into the great gap of the wilderness. But I want to think about it in personal and spiritual terms; we don't need to pack any bags or dust down our camping equipment. Because this is a journey – inwards.

Many Lents ago, I was travelling around Mount Athos – the Holy Mountain in Northern Greece that is home to some twenty monasteries. One day I encountered a monk on one of the tracks that crisscross the peninsula and I chatted with him asking where in this beautiful place at this beautiful time of year he felt closest to God – where do you encounter God? And he answered – by pointing to his heart.

What the monk's gesture suggests is the idea that the journey out into the wilderness, the *geographical* gap, the space – might actually be into ourselves. This is an old idea – given a contemporary twist by the C20th French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard. He says:

Immensity is within ourselves.⁴

What that monk on Athos and Gaston Bachelard are both expressing is an ancient notion that takes us back to those Desert Fathers and Mothers of the Early Church. In his biography of Saint Anthony, the most famous of the Desert Fathers, Athanasius writes this:

³ Belden C. Lane, *Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 65

⁴ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Maria Jolas trans. (London: Penguin, 2014), 202

Some leave home and cross the seas in order to gain an education, but there is no need for us to go away on account of the Kingdom of God, nor need we cross the sea in search of virtue. For the Lord has told us, "The Kingdom of God is within you." All that is needed for goodness is that which is within, the human heart.⁵

A couple of years ago I spent some time on the Orkneys. I visited the island of Hoy, and took a trip out to Rackwick Bay – an isolated spot overlooking the Pentland Firth back towards the British mainland. It's a wild, lonely place, an elemental place.

In 1971 the composer, Sir Peter Maxwell Davies moved to Rackwick Bay on Hoy, and lived in a crofter's cottage perched high above the ocean. The cottage had no electricity, was cut off from the world. Known as the 'enfant terrible' of experimental, contemporary music in the 1960s, he had lived and worked in the UK, in Rome, in America, and in Australia. By 1971 he was a globally renowned composer – revered and reviled in equal measure.

Stark and desolate, far removed from those centres of culture, the wilderness of Hoy seems to have afforded Maxwell Davies the space he needed to compose. It is a Lenten place, a wilderness. And it is an ancient place – full of myths and stories.

One legend that belongs to the Orkneys tells the story of the Selkie.

The Selkie is a shape-shifting creature that lives in the cold waters off the coast of the Orkney Islands. The Selkie resembles a seal, but with distinctly human eyes. I saw lots of seals this autumn walking around St David's head with Rachel and Barney. But the selkie is different. When it removes its skin, it appears as a beautiful woman, or a handsome man.

One day a Selkie – thinking she is alone – comes ashore in a hidden bay, takes off her seal skin and dances naked on the sandy beach in the sunshine.

⁵ Athanasius, *Life of St. Anthony*, tr. Robert T. Meyer, (London: Longmans Green, 1950), 37

Now, while she's dancing and sunbathing and singing on the beach, a man spies her. He decides he wants her for his wife. So, he steals and hides away her seal skin.

The man and the selkie woman are married. They have three children, and remain together for many years, and though she is a faithful wife and a devoted mother, her heart is sometimes filled with a secret longing to return home to the immensity of the sea.

One day her children are playing in the cottage where they live, and find an old trunk that was unknown to the Selkie woman. At the bottom of the trunk is a mysterious skin. The children have no idea what it could be, so they take it to their mother, asking her if she knows what it is. Recognizing her seal-skin cloak, on an impulse she takes it to the seashore - and disappears into the sea.

No matter how much the Selkie loved her mortal family, her heart called her back to the sea, to the wilderness. Somewhere inside [gesture] an un-nameable mystery called to her.

Is it just a fairy story, whimsical folklore? Or does it – like the passage from Mark's gospel with which we opened – speak to us of our own deep experience? Something impelling us – as it impelled Peter Maxwell Davies – away from the world with all its busyness, its crowds and its judgements and its timetables and responsibilities – away, out, into... the desert, the sea, the wilderness.

The Selkie made her place in the world, but something called to her from beyond that place. Something signified by the sea – a placelessness, a gap.

We are all placed in the world, happily or unhappily. I remember my first encounter with feeling placed, and yearning – like the Selkie for something else – for space.

I hated my school. The pecking orders, the petty hierarchies, the traditions and codes. They all seemed to say: know your place. Place is a mechanism of control. My life, my work, my days are weighed, numbered and measured in timetables, exam marks, reports. I am well and truly placed. Places can feel like prisons.

But there was the chapel...⁶

The chapel was a retreat *from* the world, but it was a step *towards* something too, steps down the beach. It became a gap in my days – like the sea for the Selkie, like Hoy for Maxwell Davies, like the desert for Christ – somewhere I felt impelled to go.

In the quiet, perhaps, I reflected on a verse in the hymn we used to sing: *Dear Lord and Father of Mankind*... It's a verse that's normally left out in modern editions of the hymn and that's a pity because it's beautiful and full of meaning for our subject this evening. It goes like this:

With that deep hush subduing all
Our words and works that drown
The tender whisper of Thy call,
As noiseless let Thy blessing fall
As fell Thy manna down.⁷

Alone in the chapel I was able to put all those 'words and works' aside. The silence of the chapel was a resonating chamber; it was the deep hush, the noiselessness of falling manna. The classrooms downstairs were places for delivering information and learning – for grasping and explanations. The chapel was the opposite: not a place at all, but a space for expanding my self into the silence and unknowable immensity of... what? The Selkie's sea, the limitless, the wilderness, the gap? The chapel, I felt, somehow allowed God in. There are no walls. This room is all door. Opening the door, we ask God - in the words of Augustine:

⁶ I write at more length about my experience of a school chapel in "Exploring the Spirituality of a School Chapel: Space, Silence, and the Self" in *Spiritus* Vol. 16, Fall 2016, 215-236

⁷ See Peter Horrobin and Greg Leavers, eds. *Junior Praise* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1986)

Where do I find You, so that I might learn of You, except in the fact that You transcend me?
For there is no place – whether I withdraw or approach – it makes no difference: there is no
place at all.⁸

God is the sea, the wilderness, the gap, to which we yearn to return, into which we sometimes
feel impelled, the limitless space that is the ground, the frame of all places.

Whilst we are located here today, we are held, constrained by the demands of time –
now - and location – here. Yet, the gap, the space and the silence, God’s call – knows no
place, no time. Like the Selkie, like Jesus before he can begin his public ministry in a
troubled world, we long to hear the call, we need to be tested.

This space, this wilderness – as we said at the beginning, and as Mark makes clear in
the gospel – is not easy. It’s not an escape route, a running away. There is a wonderful
moment in the film *Gravity* when the female astronaut, having been confronted by a
catastrophic series of disasters in orbit, says simply but with feeling, “I hate space.” She is, of
course, referring to what we might call ‘outer space’, that region which lies beyond Earth’s
atmosphere. But the film itself suggests a more complex reading of the astronaut’s situation:
space is a liminal zone of self-discovery, a gap, a testing ground where old griefs surface,
where jerry-built articulations of self are ruthlessly dismantled, where faith is found, or lost;
space, the wilderness is a winnowing from which she returns Eve-like to walk again, anew,
on Earth.⁹

So we’ve talked about this gap in terms of space – the space that Maxwell Davies
found on Hoy, the space symbolised by the sea in the Selkie story. But there’s another aspect
of wilderness – another way of thinking about this gap we haven’t considered yet.

⁸ *ubi ergo te inveni ut discerem te, nisi in te supra me? et nusquam locus, et recidimus et accidimus, et nusquam locus.* Augustine, *Confessions*, X.26.37 [My translation]).

⁹ *Gravity*, directed by Alfonso Cuarón (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2018)

Silence. Maxwell Davies's obituary in *The Guardian* newspaper describes the effect Hoy had on the composer's music. "One hears a new meditateness, and a spaciousness that is surely a response to the wide-open landscape of his adopted home." That spaciousness is expressed in a deep understanding of and re-engagement with... silence.

So Debussy says, "Music is the space between the notes." Or Miles Davis arguing, "It's not the notes you play; it's the notes you don't play. Don't play what's there, play what's not there."

And remember how, in the words of *Dear Lord and Father of mankind*, we hear of that

deep hush subduing all
Our words and works that drown
The tender whisper of Thy call,
As noiseless let Thy blessing fall
As fell Thy manna down.

The verse is full of silence. And it's exactly this idea that the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard expresses when he says, "Create silence! Bring men to silence. The Word of God cannot be heard in the noisy world of today."¹⁰ He's echoing Habbakuk's order: "Let all the earth keep silence before Him" (Hab.2:20)

Our world is particularly noisy. It's hard – almost impossible – to find silence, the deep hush subduing our words and works. A strident, raucous world with its perpetual demands for us to have opinions, answers, make choices by which we define ourselves, to *place* ourselves in relation to others – where do you stand: on Brexit, on immigration, on gun control?

What if we stand in the desert, on the high mountain – before God, in the silence, listening? To that immensity inside ourselves. To that hush subduing all our words and

¹⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Writings XXI, For Self-Examination / Judge for Yourself!* Howard V. Hong & Edna H Hong, eds. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 47-48

works, that noiseless blessing. So, this Lent, perhaps we should consider – moving out into the gap, the desert, the silence. It could be on top of Martinsell hill, or in the pool at the leisure centre, heard in a piece of music, or in the stillness of the night, in a poem, even in a pause for a packet of crisps – but they are all gaps. Blessed gaps. I want to close with the words of the French theologian, Simone Weil:

Grace fills the empty spaces but it can only enter where there is a void to receive it, and it is grace itself which makes this void.¹¹

Prayer

God of the gaps,
as we follow your Son, our Lord, out into the wilderness,
embarking on our Lenten journey,
we pray that we might receive your sustaining Spirit
in the spaces and silences of our lives
where the void between this world and your Kingdom thins to nothing.
Into that void we bring to you all our worries and concerns,
our anxieties for ourselves and others.
Nourish us and them, we pray,
with the manna of your word, with ministering angels,
with your loving presence. Amen.

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Lent 2019

¹¹ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr, (London: Routledge, 2002), 10

