

Fourth Sunday of Easter - 8th May 2022

Colin and I spent Monday and Tuesday on a quiet stretch of the Cornish coast. At this time of year the area where farmland meets the cliffs is covered in wildflowers, pink thrift and white campion and shepherds' purse and lots of others whose names I don't know. The sun was shining and above the flowers the larks were singing all day. Whatever happens to our countryside as we degrade it through intensive farming and development, this narrow strip between land and sea at the edge of our country will be safe because it is worthless. It's too windy, sandy and unstable for farming and so it survives in its wild glory. There is something characteristic of all things 'on the edge.' At one level they're worthless because they can't be categorised, they're neither one thing nor t'other. But look at them another way and they are infinitely precious. Those two days of Cornish early summer at the edge of the sea were a glimpse of paradise.

Christ spent his earthly life on the edge – both geographically and socially. He was born in a small village a days' walk from Jerusalem; grew up in Nazareth in the north of the country in an area which was neither a sophisticated religious centre like Jerusalem nor pagan like Tyre and Sidon but somewhere between those two. The Romanised town of Sephoris is three miles from Nazareth but there is no mention of it in the Gospels. The great Roman city of Tiberius named after the emperor is only a couple of miles from Capernaum where Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law, but we never hear of Jesus visiting it. He seems consciously to have avoided wealthy, Romanised towns. Instead, his ministry was to those on the edge.

For those who didn't believe the story of his conception, his very existence was on the edge of acceptable society. Decades after his death the libel was still circulating that his father was a Roman centurion. Something wasn't 'right' about his parentage. As a result it's possible that he was unacceptable to the Jerusalem hierarchy even before he began to challenge their attitudes and assumptions. His choice of the sea of Galilee as the place to begin his ministry is interesting too. He spent time in the seaside villages of Capernaum and probably Magdala. To us, 'the beach' suggests holidays and relaxation but for Jews of Jesus' time the sea symbolised chaos and danger. The stony beach beside the sea of Galilee was the border between the dangerous waters and the safety of dry land. It was the workplace of fishermen and it was from that space, 'on the edge,' that he called his early disciples Andrew and Simon-Peter and James and John.

Even his ministry seemed focused on those on the edge of society: a Roman centurion's servant; a woman who had been bleeding for years; a dead girl; lepers; blind beggars; a couple whose wedding was failing from lack of wine. These were not the wealthy and the elite, powerful movers and shakers. They were often not even respectable families and working people but vulnerable people on the edge of survival. In the end, when the power of Rome caught up with him and he was crucified, it took place outside the city walls, between the city and the fields and pasture of the surrounding countryside. Even today the strip of land just outside the walls of Jerusalem feels like another dimension, a place where anything could happen.

And this man who spent his life on the edge of villages, cities, families and social groups is the one who says, "The Father and I are one." And in saying so he dignifies and makes holy all those on the edge of society. He makes holy things that otherwise would be missed, ignored and forgotten because they aren't centre stage. For him the lonely and lost and outcast were and are centre stage. He didn't speak in the forum of the city, or the palace of Herod or the high priest's house. He spoke to the crowds in the temple and those on the seashore, to people who, like us, were drawn to him. We have come here this morning because there is something in us which says, 'What if?' What if those convinced, unsentimental men and women at the empty tomb are right and Christ is risen? We are 21st century realists living enlightened lives. We don't believe in magic. But we do believe in something much bigger than magic, someone utterly beyond our comprehension who is truth and love. That is the one with whom Christ claims to be one. More even than that, he calls us to be one with him and with the source of all being.

Christ chose to live on the edge of society at the border between humanity and divinity, where there is healing for the hurt and food for the hungry, the dead are raised and those who seemed of no importance are found to be beautiful and valued. That is what human life looks like from his point of view. In his earthly life Christ lived out what we are to prioritise. As disciples we are to follow his gaze, recognise what he saw, focus on the things he prioritised, and live dangerously and lightly on the edge, making those who are found on the edge the centre of our lives.