

*Sunday 21 January 2018 – Epiphany III*

*Sermon delivered by Vanessa Hadley, Ordinand, Westcott House*

Our reading from the Old Testament tells of Joshua's encounter with the divine presence. It ends with 'Loose thy shoe from off thy foot; for the place whereon thou standest is holy'. A command to show outward reverence and respect for the divine, to acknowledge the holiness of the place of encounter with God.

To be holy is to be set apart, to be dedicated or consecrated to God. Holiness allows us to experience God at work. Many of us find that holiness when entering a place of worship, a holy place dedicated to God. Certainly, in a place like this chapel with its glorious architecture, music and focus on God the notion of holy ground is easily found as you step through the door. In doing so we allow ourselves to enter fully into God's presence. We allow ourselves to step into a sanctuary, away from all that distracts and into acknowledgement that God is here and God is with us. God's space, set apart and holy.

I suspect when you walked into chapel today however you were not required to take off your shoes! This does not mean that this place is not holy but that the acknowledgement of God's presence and holiness is not an outward thing but something that happens internally. It is a process that takes place in our individual hearts and minds, each of us experience the God who knows and loves us in our own unique way, and God meets each of us uniquely.

Whether it is in gazing at the splendour of the building and seeing God in the craftsmanship, drawing closer to God in prayer and silence or finding God in the glory of the liturgy and music, however we encounter God best here, we all have met with God today.

This encounter is transformative, it places God firmly at the centre of our lives. It allows us to draw back to God whatever has gone on in our lives, however chaotic they may be, God is always there, constant, enduring and faithful. By drawing in and making time for God we are able to be attentive to God's presence with us, we can enter into that still, small voice and then listen to it.

This allows us to offer up to God all that we are and all that we do. We can place all that we are concerned about in the world and those we love into

God's care and we can trust that God will answer – not always in the way we expect, but answer nevertheless. By being in the holiness of worship we are able to reflect holiness into every situation in our lives as God's transformative love shines through and into those areas. It transforms us and it transforms our perspective.

In our reading on realising that he was in the presence of God 'Joshua fell on his face to the earth, and did worship, and said unto him, What saith my Lord unto his servant?' Joshua was willing to fall down and listen. This allowed him to hear God's message. Joshua submitted to God's will, was willing to be his faithful servant, and thus removed the barrier between himself and God. Sometimes we struggle to hear God's voice calling out amongst the noise, or we serve other things that get in the way creating obstacles and stumbling blocks for our relationship with God. By taking time to listen to God and allow God in we are then able to hear and see more clearly God at work in the world. By letting God in we are able to be transformed and restored, then we are equipped to be God's faithful servants in the world, helping others to hear.

Another way of looking at the command to take off his shoes is to consider closeness to creation. By removing the barrier between himself and the earth Joshua is able to be fully at one with creation and thus with the God who created it.

Joshua lifts up his eyes and looked. This allows him to see what is around him and what is there. In directing his thoughts upwards – towards God he is given clear direction from God. In the context of our reading Joshua is by Jericho awaiting God's instruction to besiege the city. In the next chapter Joshua is given instructions on how to do so and successfully takes the city. It is his faithfulness to God's instructions and signs that brings his success. Joshua stops to look for God's signs before acting. To be God's agents in the world we need to stop and look for his signs. To lift up our eyes and look to see things afresh and as God sees them. To open our eyes to the needs of others and respond in loving service.

This of course is the real challenge, stepping back over the threshold of the chapel into the world and carrying in our hearts that love, that holiness, that transforms our lives and the lives of those we encounter. It is no small task, it is one that requires attentiveness and acknowledgement that we all fall short.

This is where our grounding in holiness and love is essential, God surpasses all our shortcomings with his immeasurable love and it is only in that love that we walk in his light.

God's love is transformative, it changes everything. The knowledge of the Gospel is a powerful gift that we are called to cherish and share. We see an example of this in our reading from Galatians, where St Paul recounts his own transformation. He went from persecuting the church to being one of its greatest evangelists. An experience enabled by the transformative power of Christ's love.

Through Christ we are able to change who we are, we are helped to embody Christian values by following his Gospel and living out the message to others. It is an ongoing journey which every Christian is called to follow in their discipleship.

In Galatians Paul states 'But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles.' The purpose of being set apart and holy is not to keep God's holiness guarded in Chapels and places of worship. It is a calling to be sent out in holiness to be holy ground for others in the world. To become agents of God's grace in the world to enable others to encounter the Gospel. Our Gospel is a gospel for all people and all nations, it is our privilege, joy and responsibility to share it. Our faith is best shared by a lived example of inward holiness which points to the living and loving God.