

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost—Year C
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
The Rev. Ian Burch
July 3, 2016

Several years ago, I took fifteen High School students on a pilgrimage to the holy Island of Iona off the western coast of Scotland. Iona is home to a 6th century monastery and has been a sanctuary for Christianity in the British Isles for centuries—surviving Viking purges and pagan rulers equally well. In modern times, all the monks are gone, but an ecumenical group of pilgrims still lives in the ruins of the monastery out in the Scottish sea, praying for peace and providing rest and rejuvenation to any travelers seeking a deeper connection with God. I thought the High School students could learn something about prayer and our place in Christian history by spending some time walking on the holy island.

Celtic Christians over the years have referred to the holy island of Iona as a “thin place.” And I think they mean that this is a place where heaven and earth don't seem as far apart as they do in the rest of the world. Part of me thinks the idea of thin places is beautiful. I've experienced the sensation of God being close at the bed of someone dying, at the Eucharist, at a moment of prayer with other faithful people. But another part of me resists the idea of thin places. Surely the God of all space and time doesn't pick and chose some places to be holy and other places to be mundane, or worse, profane.

My objections notwithstanding, the idea of this places persists. Perhaps it is just that there are times or places where our proper posture toward God is easier to find—times and places where reverence and connection with the Divine manifest more readily. I'm not sure how all that works, but as far as I can tell, holy places are here to stay.

Taking the kids to Iona came into my mind as I read the marching orders that Jesus gives to the Seventy followers He sends out in this morning's Gospel. You can see that the Jesus Movement in the Gospel of Luke is alive and growing. We don't just have 12 disciples anymore; we've moved into the big leagues—70 disciples being sent out to different towns all around Judea. I've heard the story of the 70 being sent many times, and I imagine you have as well. Typically the part I remember, though, is that, when the people in the towns the 70 visit don't want to hear them preach, the disciples supposed to wipe the dirt of their town off of their feet and move on. It's good advice still. But on this reading, I noticed something else that Jesus said to the 70, Jesus says, “Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, cure the sick who are there and say to them, ‘the Kingdom of God has come near you.’”

What might that mean for the kingdom of God to be close to us? How would that look? Or sound like? Or taste?

Jesus tells the 70 to go into the world because there is a plentiful harvest. Or, put another way, there are people out in the world who might not know what it is like to feel the kingdom of God

be close—who might not know what it is to experience heaven and earth living close together. There are people who haven't experienced the grace of God, the justice of God, the love of God.

And that is where following Jesus comes into play. Jesus tells the 70 that we are the hands of God in this world. We are the feet of God in this world. We heal and love and work arm in arm all in the name of this Jesus whom we follow. We feed the hungry in His name and clothe the naked in His name. And we proclaim to anyone who will listen, "The Kingdom of God has come near you!"

I appreciate that it is very easy to proclaim the nearness of the Kingdom of God when you are isolated at a monastery in the middle of the ocean. Or if you're kneeling before an altar about ready to receive the Body and Blood of Christ.

But it's a little harder to proclaim the kingdom of God when we're reading the news in the mornings and there's another shooting or mass act of violence. It's a little harder to proclaim the kingdom of God when kids starve in our own city and the gap between the haves and have nots is wider than it's been in modern times. Where is heaven in the midst of these very earthly realities?

Heaven is here; grace is here; God is here; love is here. That is the sermon that the 70 delivered all over kingdom of Israel, and it is the same sermon that we deliver today, in our corner of the world. God is in the frightened and neglected places in the world—with the sick, with the dying, with the afflicted. So, maybe it is harder to proclaim that the Kingdom of God has come near when we're faced with sometimes overwhelming evil or corruption or apathy. Harder, yes. And that much more vital. We preach it, not as a description of what we see, but as a reimagination of the world as God would have it be. We preach the kingdom of God always in hope, my friends. The kingdom of God is near because of our very speaking it into the world. Claiming the kingdom of God for the world is an act of resistance and an act that brings heaven closer to earth.

Maybe some of the particulars of those marching orders have changed, but the essence of them hasn't. The world is still hungry to hear that heaven and earth are closer than we realize. The world is still desperate to have its demons cast out.

And we are invited into this project by Jesus. To be the hands, feet and voice of God here in the world. And most importantly, to be the imagination of God. It's easy to see heaven and earth together in the holy places. Our job is to imagine God's kingdom being fulfilled in the regular ones.

I have no idea whether my students met God on the Holy island. My hope is that, when we were done with our time together, they understood that the kingdom of God has drawn near—no matter where we stand. Amen.