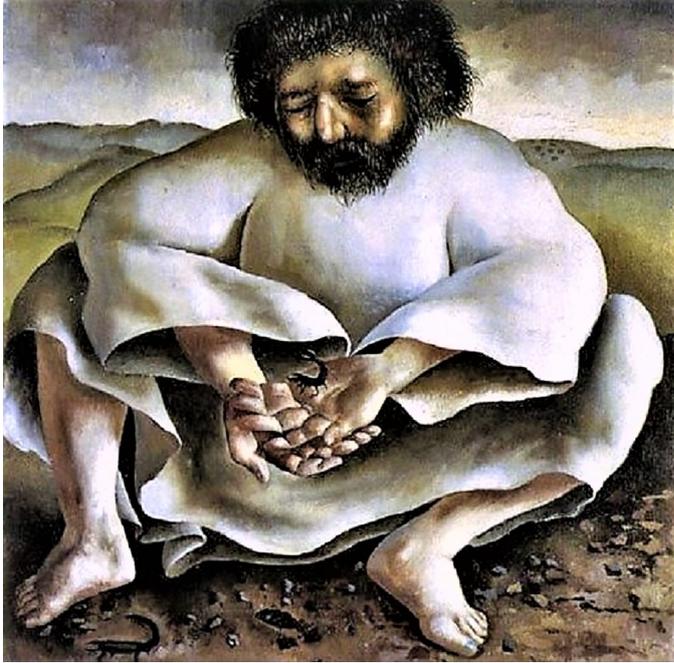


Pentecost 5

Zech 9: 9-12; Song 2: 8-13; Romans 7: 15-25a; Matt 11: 16-19, 25-30

PAX

Dear Friends in Christ



- When you look at this picture what do you see?
- Who is this person?
- What is he doing?
- How do you feel about this as a religious image?

The picture is by Stanley Spencer and it is entitled 'Christ in the Wilderness'. To me the picture could be a depiction of God's Church today! We appear to be in a desert, a wilderness, and we do not know what to do or how to be. Others around us know precisely what their lives are about, but the Church? That is another matter. So here we see him seated in the desert contemplating something rather uncomfortable in his hands!

Scorpions are creatures that can cause pain and death. In the picture we can see the scorpion has pincers and a raised tail. Are they raised in a greeting or menace? The scorpion's intentions are not clear. Christ's eyes, however, remain focused on the scorpion, His mouth is lost in His thicket of a beard, He has obviously been in the wilderness for sometime (rather like you and I), and is in need of a visit to the hairdresser! As Christ gazes at the scorpion I can hear Him say "You don't frighten me, little one, I made you."

Here is the look of Love: Acceptance! How are you at accepting those that frighten you or threaten because they are different to you? It was in the desert that Jesus overcame temptation and did not succumb to the devil's advances. It was in the desert that Jesus must have learnt to set Love free. All His cravings, whether physical or more pernicious, for power, attention, misplaced affection were put aside. It was in the desert He learnt 'un-wanting'. His Love conquered all! The scorpion can be seen as representing death or healing. It

can inflict the pain that enslaves or frees, kills or cures. Scorpion! Our Church needs to learn to Love you. We maybe in the desert, but behind Christ are the green hills of Paradise that are open, freely, to those who can Love!

I wonder if God sees you and I sitting in the middle of the road – rather like Christ in the desert. The difference being that Jesus is looking with Love whereas we are blocking the passage of the Holy Spirit! God wants us to ‘get out of the way’ so that His work can continue and not be blocked by our intolerances, rules and numerous regulations. Everything is carefully set out in-



order to ‘Stop’ the progress of the Holy Spirit! An appropriate text might be:

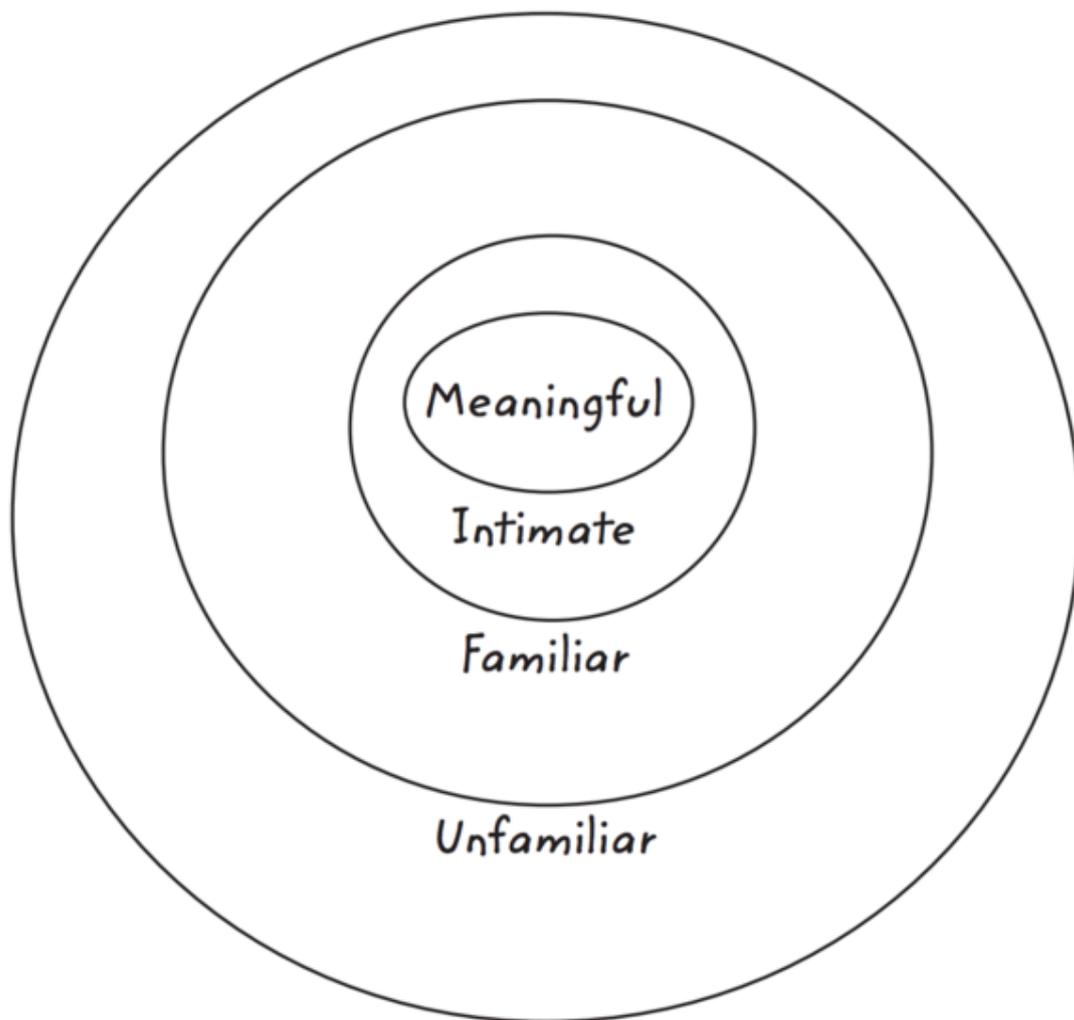
*“...to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market-places and calling to one another,
¹⁷ “We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.”¹*

Could the text be about ‘fickle wilfulness’ that never wants what is offered? Our society appears divided on almost every issue, rather like the children in the parable. It is not the children’s character that is at fault but their conflicting wishes. Could it be that we do not know what we really want? Perhaps we do not want anything at all! Everything must just be the same. Our comfort must not be disturbed. Yet, sitting in a desert cannot be comfortable. Something must happen. There is a new authority in our gospel. It is in the title “Son of Man”. In Matthew 9: 10-13 Jesus is found eating with those on the edge of society and is criticised by the Pharisees for His behaviour. Matthew here shows how catastrophic that criticism of Jesus is. As “Son of Man,” Jesus, the Messiah, will one day come and judge the world. Yet, Israel in the gospel only sees Jesus as a human being who carouses and drinks. (There is a double play on the word ‘man’ here.) The truth of the matter is, that whether He is like John the Baptist, an ascetic, or Himself, there is no desire to follow Him. This is what is wrong!

Modern Christianity appears more human than previous representations, but the demands of the Cross are always there. We may not need the extreme ascetism of hermits in the desert or that of the ancient Celtic monks, whose

¹ Matt 11: 16,17

feast days we have celebrated recently. Jesus went further than John the Baptist: The gospel today is heard with pleasure (rather like comfortable worship) but it is not taken seriously if acceptance, Repentance and Sacrifice are put aside. Our new bishop, Bp Kevin, has joined us at a challenging time in the Church's life. The Church is learning to live with uncomfortable truths, and we are beset with legislation that appears to attempt to stop us at every turn. The road to Paradise is not blocked though! We must be like Christ in the Stanley Spencer picture. We must be merciful and learn to live with the uncomfortable. In this way the road ahead will become clear. We must be looking inwardly at ourselves, whilst actively being present to the world, questioning a culture and society, that has become so sterile that it has lost the ability to Love meaningfully!



Lord Jesus Christ, help us to understand that your call to the cross is not folly or scandal but a call to entrust ourselves to the power and wisdom of God. Strengthen our faith so that in times of difficulty and trouble we may remain full of hope and optimism. For you are Lord forever and ever. Amen.