

## LIVING IN THE THIN TIME

In my message to you in the annual report I spoke of embracing a sense of confident hope as we experience this uncertain time in the life of the church – a time when we can see the church as we have known it in decline and we are not yet able to see clearly the plan God has for the church in the future. It can be difficult to live in such times – difficult to remain faithful and confident – difficult not to wonder if God has forsaken us or to grasp at any strategy to maintain the status quo. It is an unsettling time when we can experience a sense of dread or foreboding – even fear.

Fear is part of our human experience – to some extent, part of every human life since we cannot deny moments of fear and threat whether from evildoers and armies – from loneliness, illness, and death – from the sense of failing as God’s church. And like most human experience it is addressed in our Psalms...

*The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?*

*The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?*

We hear a shout of unassailable confidence yet it is also an admission that we express this confidence precisely because we also experience great vulnerability. The feeling of fear is real and our response to it is faith.

There are times and places when our faith is crystallized – times when we feel fully connected to the divine or places that seem as close to heaven as it is possible to be in this life. These times and places are part of the mystery of God – part of the unexplained “knowing” that is faith – the conviction of things unseen. And it is that conviction that sustains our hope in the time between the *now and not yet* of Christian understanding.

We seem to be living in one of those times in-between. On occasion it feels a bit like suspended animation – we cannot go back to what was but we cannot create the future until its time has come. I liken this to the Celtic understanding of *thin time* or *thin space*.

The early Celtic people of ancient Britain believed that you could go to certain places to be closer to God. These places have long been called *thin places*. Thin places are geographical locations scattered throughout the British Isles – places where a person experiences only a very slim divide between the past, present, and future.

This Celtic sense of place designated significant natural locations as *holy trees, holy mountains, holy wells*. They were fascinated by shorelines where water met the land, by fjords and rivers, by wells where water bubbled up from deep below, by doorways which were the meeting places from the outside and inside. These places spoke of meeting, of transitions from one state to another, *where the veil between this world and the next is so sheer you can almost step through*.

When Christianity spread into this area, the Celtic Christians preserved aspects of the ancient folklore for revering thin places – certainly they could see evidence of it in the mountaintop experiences often recorded in the biblical text. They broadened the understanding to encompass not only geographical places, but also moments when the holy became visible to the eyes of the human spirit. Thin places took on Christian meaning – where a person is somehow able to encounter a more ancient and eternal reality within the present time – moments when we experience a deep sense of God’s presence in our everyday world.

Perhaps you have a particular place that is holy to you in a similar way: the beach you've walked countless times where water rolls onto the sand in a familiar way, a place of reunion where God seems always close by and all is right with the world, a mountain vista that has taken you close to the stars and seemingly closer to God, a home church or family cemetery, or even your own yard and garden. Do you have a place where you can go and feel especially close to God? Or perhaps you can recall a time which you can remember and re-visit as a source of spiritual awakening, where you felt particularly connected to God.

I have had this experience in hospital rooms and in cemeteries – during a Cree sweat lodge and while singing songs in the community of faith. The sacredness of the experience lies in my sense of connectedness to God at a particular time and place. Try to remember your own experience of a *thin time* – a *thin place* when God was very close – very real.

There are certain passages of scripture that are particularly helpful in transporting us to a special place with God in our time. The words and images of Psalm 27 lead us to such a place – a kind of thin place where human and divine meet in a beautiful closeness.

*The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?*

*The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?*

*Come, my heart says, seek God's face. Your face O Lord do I seek.*

Our confidence is in the Lord who is light, salvation and strength no matter the trouble we face or the fear we experience. The Psalmist knows that we need some sense of a place of refuge, an ally, a source of grace beyond our limited selves to help us deal with the experience of life. And what is needed is not some power looming in the distance but a relationship with the living Lord. The one yearning expressed in the psalm is that the presence of God should be available. What is being sought is a continuing and deepening relationship with God whom we trust.

This psalm is a meeting place for a very close relationship! It is composed of two rather distinct units, each of which has a special character. The first part of the psalm is a statement of confidence and trust in God, a God who inspired this confidence by acts of faithfulness in the past, and therefore may be depended upon to relate to us in a similar manner in the future. This sense of dependence is boldly declared at the beginning – God as light and salvation – personally familiar with only the whisper of a gossamer veil between human need and divine embrace.

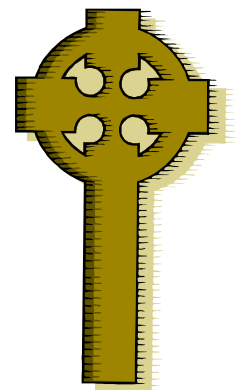
Yet this is not merely some other-worldly picture of a divine close encounter without substance. Along with the affirmation of God's intimate closeness is a gritty realism – the admission of our very human need for help in times of despair and anxiety. This psalm is a thin place for meeting God where – as in our everyday lives – the strings of our experience strum both the soft notes of gratitude and trust and the shrill ones of anguish and despair. With low notes and high notes, this psalm invokes an cherished relationship with God.

Today's psalm invites us into a thin place – a place of intimacy with God so that we can live with confident hope in the current thin time of our life when we know that God is here yet we struggle to know God's plan.

The trusting confidence we find in relationship with the living God does not eliminate trouble from life, nor does this deep faith cause us to deny reality or remain silent about it. Like the Psalmist we can cry out our lament – begging to be heard and to see God's face, pleading not to be dismissed or abandoned, praying to be helped and taught the right way to go, hoping to be encouraged even when fears set our hearts racing and fill us with dread. Faith answers our fear with hopeful confidence because of our relationship with God in Christ Jesus. We are invited to trust God with us – giving us courage to continue our journey. This is a thin place, to be sure, and a word we can trust.

*Hope in the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; hope in the LORD.*

**Let us pray...** *God of thin places, we are grateful that you invite us to come very near. We give you thanks for your choosing to come close to us in the whispering wind of the Holy Spirit, who passes gently through our days and emboldens us for courageous faith, and in the person of Jesus Christ in whom we catch a vision of your faith. We see you as creator of all that surrounds us and praise you for the beauty of special places, where we find our hearts at rest in you. We are grateful that you welcome us into your love and desire that we be your children seeking compassion and mercy for those in special need. When we fail, you pick us up and hold us close and teach us to walk again. Teach us to walk through all of our days as ambassadors of your peace in our communities and in this world. **Amen***



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The Rev. L. T. Kavanagh, 2010