

THE WORD FOR TODAY

“One holy place I know is a workshop attached to a barn. There is a wood-burning stove in it made out of an oil drum. There is a workbench, dark and dented, with shallow, crammed drawers behind one of which a cat lives. There are various lengths of chain and rope, shovels and rakes of different sizes and shapes, some worn-out jackets and caps on pegs, an electric clock that doesn't keep time. On the workbench are two small plug-in radios, both of which have serious things wrong with them. There are several metal boxes full of wrenches, and a bench saw. There are a couple of chairs with rungs missing. There is an old yellow bulldozer with its tracks caked with mud parked outside against one wall. The place smells mainly of engine oil and smoke---both wood smoke and pipe smoke. The windows are small, and even on bright days what light there is comes through mainly in window-sized patches on the floor. I have no idea why this place is holy, but you can tell it is the moment you set foot in it if you have an eye for that kind of thing. For reasons known only to God, it is one of the places he uses for sending his love to the world through.”

The words of Frederick Buechner who has no idea why that workshop is sacred, holy, but he knows that it is. There is nothing in his description that gives any indication even of what is holy about it, but when he goes there he can sense it as clear as day. It's one of those places where earth and heaven seem to touch one another, where the gap between them is tissue thin. A sacred place.

Places can be sacred. Objects can be sacred. Times can be sacred. People can be sacred. Music can be sacred. Works of art can be sacred. But what do we mean when we say that something is sacred? That it has a quality about it that somehow helps us to sense the presence of God or that connects us to God. That somehow in this place or at this time earth and heaven seem to kiss; reality becomes transparent and you can see right through to things far deeper and more mysterious. Right through to God.

You can encounter the sacred in all sorts of times and places, and more often than not its unexpected. You've all experienced sacred moments, or at least moments where you caught a fleeting glimpse of the sacred. It might have been walking on a beach. It might have been witnessing the birth of a baby. It might have been opening a letter that says "I'm sorry" from someone you'd given up hope of hearing from again. Moments when, however fleetingly, it becomes suddenly clear to you that there is more to life than shopping and watching television.

The word of the wonderful song by our own Eric Boswell

"There's more te life than women and beer; there's more te life," says he.

Ne doubt it's true but up te noo it hasn't occurred te me.

There's more te life than women and beer' it's obvious, ye knaa.

Aa'm searchin' neet and day but aa haven't found out what it is so far.

There is more to life .

When suddenly the universe itself is pulsating with light and life and the air is fragrant with the fresh and lively smell of mercy and you are caught up in the almost unbearable preciousness and mystery of life.

Now although those kind of experiences are not everyday occurrences for most of us, they need not be nearly as uncommon as they are. Sacredness is not a rare and elusive quality. The sacred is all around us in every sight we see, in every place we go, in every creature we meet, in every thing we touch. All of creation is infused with the presence of God. Everything that lives lives because of the life breath of God within it. Everything that exists in heaven and on earth bears the finger prints of its creator, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Everything we encounter is capable of being sacramental, of being that window through which we see the sacred.

THE SERMON

Everything that exists in heaven and on earth bears the finger prints of its creator, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. Everything we encounter is capable of being sacramental, of being that window through which we see the sacred. But most of the time it isn't, is it? Most of the time we see only what is immediately in front of our eyes and not what's behind it, within it. You can see this most clearly when we are encountering people.

If you just get chemists and biologists to explain people to you you will get the impression that everyone is pretty much the same. It takes poets and artists to convey the essence of an individual person. Why? Because you can't measure spirit. Because you can't analyse mystery. Because you can't control the sacred. You can only sense it, feel it, experience it.

This question of the nature of the sacred is an issue in the readings we heard. In the story from Luke's gospel we saw what happens when somebody does try to control the sacred. Tries to regulate it, to guard it. The leader of the synagogue, a man to whom the handling of sacred things has been entrusted, has so lost his ability to see beyond the externals of things that even the most transparently sacred things are just mundane objects now.

A woman comes in to the synagogue, a woman who has been crippled for eighteen years. What does the leader see? An outcast. Something grotesque and distorted. Hardly human. But what does Jesus see? He sees a woman, a person of dignity and worth. In short he sees a sacred being - someone who bears in her very being the image of God. He sees her disability too, but only as secondary. He sees her as a sacred bearer of the image of God who just happens to have a disability. He can, however, see that the disability has marginalised her in the community, that it has caused her to be shunned, her sacredness denied. And so Jesus commits a sacred act. A sacramental act - one of those acts that pulls the veil back and allows us to see for a moment the reality of God that permeates the world. He heals her. He said "Woman, you are free," and laid his hands on her back.

But the synagogue leader, not able to see the sacredness of the woman and not able to see the sacredness of healing, is indignant. This breaks the rules. This is not allowed. There are times and places for these things and this is not it. This is the Sabbath, a sacred day. You can't do that sort of thing here today. Talk about missing the boat! What could be more appropriate than a sacred action for a sacred being on a sacred day. Those who try to regulate and control the sacred rapidly lose their ability to even recognise the sacred. They blind themselves to the presence of God all around them.

Jeremiah wasn't blind to the sacred presence of God all around him, but he did start out with a somewhat limited view of its extent. The story we heard is the first story in the account of Jeremiah, the story of God calling him to be a prophet. And Jeremiah starts out by protesting the inappropriateness of God's choice. "I'm not up to the job. I don't know how to speak. I am only a boy." One time you can be quite sure some one has misread themselves is when you hear them say, "I'm only a . . ." No one is only a . . .

God says to Jeremiah, "*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.*" You what? I consecrated you. Made you sacred.

Now that is not unique to Jeremiah. That's all of us. Before you were formed in the womb God knew you, and before you were born God consecrated you, declared you to be sacred. Not just because you are created in the image of God. But because within you, there is God. Within you there is all the potential to be Christ-like, to be God-like, to bring to fullness in your own being the essence of the holy God who is love. You are a sacred being, a God-bearer, and no profanity, no iniquity can fully disguise that. The only thing that can prevent your sacredness from being seen is the scales on the eyes of the beholder.

No matter who you are, no matter how bent and twisted you may have become, no matter how low you've gone, that image of God, you are still a sacred being - a latent sacredness perhaps but crying out to be set free from its bondage. Like that shed that Fred Buechner spoke of, become one of the places, one of the people that God uses for sending his love to the world through. You can grow into the fullness of your sacredness.

You can be one of those people in whose presence others know that the Kingdom of God has come near, that heaven and earth have kissed one another. Like a true icon, you become a window through which people see beyond the crippling limitations of their quietly despairing lives and catch a glimpse of the sacred and mysterious realities of a universe infused with the Spirit of God and being drawn to fulfilment in Jesus Christ. The sacred is all around us, in every place, in every moment. And the sacred is always within us, calling us to embrace our God given destiny as sacred bearers of God in a sacred world.