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“Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem... a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.” John 4: 21 – 24

Dear Friends,

One of the soul-training exercises I try to engage in during Lent every year is to read the whole of the Gospel of St John in one go. It takes perhaps a couple of hours if you are a slow reader like me. I managed to set aside the time to do this on Saturday afternoon. It is a fascinating way of reading such a wonderful book because it gives you an overview of the whole story of Jesus' ministry from a particular spiritual perspective. St John adds dimensions to the Gospel which are not found in the other three. It is probably written from a later date than the others and gives a perspective that reflects not just on the events of Jesus' ministry but upon their significance for the early church. It is a way of reading the Gospel that enables you to make a mental note of the great themes which recur throughout the story. My reflection for Easter Day will consider some of those great themes.

However, for the purposes of this pastoral letter, my attention was drawn to the words quoted above from John Chapter 4, and Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan women at Jacob's Well. Jesus has been speaking with her about the living water which he alone can offer to quench the spiritual thirst in her soul (and ours). And then the woman asks a question in the form of a statement. The question is this: “where is the right place to worship God? We Samaritans think it is here on this mountain, you Jews think it is at the Temple in Jerusalem.”

It is a question which has a sudden and very real resonance for us today as we are confined to our homes, with no physical contact with other members of the Body of Christ.

Perhaps John includes this aspect of the story if his Gospel is written after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem under the Romans in 70AD, in order to offer comfort and hope to the dispersed Christian community, that their worship was valid wherever they were able to offer it to God. Certainly, the Gospel was written after the Day of Pentecost, when God's message of love, hope and resurrection power was preached by Peter to folk from all across the known world, and that message was subsequently taken out all across the known world to enable people to worship God wherever they were.

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The Methodist Church 

You see, the Gospel of Christ – the good news of God’s love expressed to all people through the death and resurrection of Jesus – was all about breaking down the barriers. The barriers that included some and excluded others – like the Samaritan woman for example!

One of the barriers it broke down was the location of worship. No longer was it required to be expressed in the Temple in Jerusalem. No longer was it restricted to the Jewish people. For John Wesley, it was this sense of dis-location of worship that enabled him to preach to the masses in the open air of cities, towns and villages across this country.

It seems to me that for much of the time since the days of the first Christians, God’s people have sought to re-locate worship back inside a building and we have come to somehow think that the only place we can truly worship God is within the walls of a Church building. Just maybe, one of the things that God is asking of us during this time of lockdown is to think again.

Remember Jesus’ words: “the true worshippers will worship the Father in Spirit and in truth.” God does not require us to have church buildings in order to worship and to express our faith. They can be great resources for the work of God’s Kingdom, but sometimes we allow ourselves to place too much emphasis upon them. And sometimes, sadly, we allow them to become like millstones around our necks!

Remember, that on that first Easter morning, Mary worshipped the risen Lord in the Garden, not in the Temple. Remember that on that first Easter evening the risen Lord came and met with his disciples behind their locked doors and they worshipped him there. Remember that on the Day of Pentecost, people from all around the world came to faith in the risen Lord because of the Spirit of God at work through the disciples and in their own lives.

Yes, of course we miss our physical connections with people, and at no time more so than on the great festival of Easter Day. But because of the great gift of God to us in God’s Spirit, we are still connected to one another as members of the Body of Christ here on earth. You can worship God where you are, in your own home, sitting on your own sofa, knowing that as you do, so too, do countless people all around the world. We are not alone. We are never alone. We are always in God’s presence and somehow, in some mystical way that we simply do not comprehend, we are connected not just with our brothers and sisters in Christ today, but with all God’s saints of everyday and every age.

So though we are not able to share in bread and wine together on Easter Day this year, still we are able to pray together: “God of our salvation, we thank you for our communion with the risen Christ and with all who love him in earth and heaven. We pray that, strengthened by his grace, we may serve you faithfully all our days; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.” (The Methodist Worship Book P. 172)

So, as we worship at home this Easter Day, may “God the Father, by whose glory Christ was raised from the dead, strengthen you to walk with him in his risen life; and may almighty God bless you, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.” (MWB. P. 173)

With every blessing,

Rev Tim Perkins