

Sunday 21 April 2024
Fourth Sunday of Easter

Liverpool Parish Church

NT: Acts 4.5-12

NT: I John 3.16-24

Gp: John 10.11-18

I don't know if you've ever thought much about lichen. We see lichen all the time: on the branches of trees, on walls, on rocks, on pavements. Merlin Sheldrake, in his popular book about fungi, *Entangled Life*, reckons that lichen cover up to 8% of the world's surface, more than tropical rainforests. Most of the time, however, we pay them no mind. Lichen are unassuming to our eyes. But take another look and we can appreciate the sheer variety and complex beauty of each one. They splash the world in white, green and orange. Take an even deeper look and we understand that lichen are a fascinating form of life. In fact, they are *two* forms of life which have come together: fungi with either algae or photosynthetic bacteria. Lichen are symbiotic: organisms in which two forms of life indwell one another to mutual advantage.

We're coming to appreciate more and more how these wonderful exchanges are key to all life. Even the humble cell, the building block of all developed organic life, is a product of merging: the nucleus in the cell was once a free-living bacterium, now wholly integrated into a new way of being, a new possibility.

We ourselves live in intimate closeness with myriad other forms of life. The human body is estimated to contain 39 trillion microbes: bacteria, viruses, fungi, not to mention the tiny tardigrades which live and die in the pores on your face. It might make you itch and squirm to think about it, but in many ways our life would not be possible if we were not host to these multitudes. Each one of us is an ecosystem.

Perhaps then we need to rethink what it means to be an individual. Perhaps the whole idea of an individual, a single entity in isolation from others, was only ever a fantasy. Are there lessons here for the life of faith? It would be crass to just read off a way of thinking about human beings and God from the science of lichens and microbes; however, if the Spirit of God permeates all creation, if we are part of that creation, then we should not turn too quickly from what the lichen may teach us.

Mutual indwelling has always been a powerful image in Christian scripture and tradition. Our reading from the first letter of John is a wonderful example: 'All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.' This is confirmed over and over the New testament: we are called not only to follow Jesus or believe in God from a safe distance, but to dwell in God. In turn, Christ becomes the life that dwells in us. In John's gospel, Jesus calls us to be one with him, as the Son is one with the Father.

Indwelling is not the same as identity. We do not stop being ourselves in this wonderful exchange. But we do stop being that small self which hardens its boundaries and pushes away what is different. Our deepest self is in communion with the God who cannot be confined. This should not be surprising: after all, God is not simply an individual, but Trinity in Unity: mutual indwelling of love, given and received.

Beyond the scriptures, it is often the mystics who have reminded us of this. They have invited us on a path to union with God. I realise that mysticism might be seen as something otherworldly, something for the few. It can sound like you have to be a monk or nun or at least some kind of elite spiritual expert to attain the heady heights of union with God. There's a suspicion that mysticism is not for practical people.

There is no doubt that the mystical path is challenging: there is much to leave behind, not least the guilt, anxiety and resentment which we carry like stones in a backpack. But I would argue that this is simply the way of Christian conversion, not a path reserved for elites or experts. It is the ordinary mysticism addressed to each and every one of us: the working out of our baptism, our communion, our prayer. It is not a special set of commands for spiritual superheroes.

Mysticism of this sort does not turn its back on the world, our relationships, our work, our struggles. In John's letter, this is made plain: 'How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help.' For God to abide in us is also for us to belong to one another. That indwelling frees us from hearts turned inward, as it frees us from our own negativity and guilt about ourselves: 'whenever our hearts condemn us,' John writes, we need to remember that 'God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.'

God already knows us, knows all there is to know; and in knowing us God loves us, and in loving us God is one with us. As the good shepherd, Jesus says, he is not coming with power and control: no, 'I know my own and my own know me'. The good shepherd lays down his life, himself becomes the lamb who offers everything in love. The shepherd and the sheep are one; we called and known by name and caught up in his self-giving love. To obey his command is not, first and foremost, following a set of rules; it is simply to listen to him, to trust him and to receive the grace to love in return. Realising this, we are set free to serve the world, to love, to work for justice. To work also for the healing of creation, whose most humble and insignificant-seeming organisms have much to teach us.

Of course, mystics have often been unpopular with the church. They do not care much for its orders and boundaries. They often do not wait for its approval. Knowing the God within them, they have a freedom to walk their own way and love in their own way. One of my favourite examples is 13th – 14th century mystic Marguerite Porete. Porete was a beguine – a lay woman who followed vows of chastity and poverty. The beguines flourished in parts of France, the Netherlands and Germany at this time. However, they also fell under

suspicion. They were not part of any formal religious order, relying on local arrangements for oversight. Various edicts insisted that they obeyed their parish priest and did not wander around unregulated, on pain of excommunication. The church did not like women to wander.

The beguines were also considered a hotbed of heresy, especially the heresy of the 'free spirit'. This taught that the soul could attain such union with God it no longer needed the church. Porete herself was burned at the stake for heresy in 1310. In 1311, the Council of Vienne condemned her teachings and demanded that the beguines be disbanded. And yet, her work survived, in the book *The Mirror of Simple Souls*. As a lay woman, Porete claims her own voice, her own authorship and authority. Part of the reason she can do this is that for her, the Holy church is not as important as it thinks it is: she sometimes calls it 'little' Holy church in a way that must have infuriated the bishops gathered at Vienne. I hope it did. I hope they were ashamed to meet her in heaven.

What interests me in Porete is her teaching that our truest identity is, in a sense, divine: as creatures God dwells in us, undercutting hierarchy. The soul becomes a mirror of God in its love and freedom, in letting go the false self of the ego.

According to Porete, the highest aim for the soul is to live without a why, to live without purpose. Those who live to reach and achieve goals are still obsessed with projects and results; they see the essence of their life lying outside of them. But our goal is to be like God, who has no goal, no anxious striving after anything, but is simply life and joy itself. God, says Porete, is one 'pleasing fruition' – a limitless bearing fruit. This is what she thinks we are to become – or rather, what we realise we already are. For nothing truly is, except God. Porete writes: 'nothing is except Him in love of light of union of praise: one will, one love, and one work in two natures . . . By such divine Love, the divine Will works in me, for me and without my possession.'

This is not arrogance. The soul lives without grasping, possessing nothing, allowing the creative fruition of God to flow – unencumbered as she puts it. In this state of the soul, Porete says, 'the Holy Church does not know how to understand her. Holy Church singularly praises fear of God, for saintly fear of God is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Still, fear of God would destroy the being of freeness . . . perfect freeness possesses no why.' While the church and the world busy themselves with works and plans and all the religious and social mechanisms which generate fear, the soul becomes divine, fearless - and loses any need to pursue, own, control.

Porete is a radical, one the church authorities of her day feared, excluded and silenced. She comes from a very different time, but she still speaks to us. Porete and the mystical tradition can inspire us still: in our struggles to live as an inclusive church; in our resistance to the hatred and violence which divide people; in our call to love all creation. Above all, Jesus calls us to dwell in him and he in us, in an ever-widening circle of acceptance and compassion.

Our reading from John's letter ended: 'by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.' Let me end with the final lines of Gerard Manley Hopkins' famous poem, 'God's grandeur' a beautiful affirmation of the Spirit's life deep in the heart of all creation:

And for all this, nature is never spent;
 There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
 Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
 World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

Fr Steven Shakespeare