

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 18th July 2021

The island of Arran never fails to impress me. On those occasions when I have had the good fortune to stay for a few days, I have relished its glories, and they are many. This year, on our second motor home adventure ever, the first part of our week away was spent at Lamlash, and the sun shone from a cloudless sky.

As we made the short crossing on the ferry, and approached Brodick, I imagined the glory days of the Clyde steamers when such magnificent vessels as the Glen Sannox, the Duchess of Hamilton, the Duchess of Montrose, the Jeannie Deans, and all those majestic ships plied up and down the Firth of Clyde, transporting locals and holiday makers to and from a plethora of piers, and it was all very exciting. How marvellous it must have been to have sat on deck and watched the picturesque scenery passing by, all the while listening to the Bands which were a regular feature up until the late 1950s, playing a vast repertoire of music, including Viennese waltzes and Gilbert and Sullivan.

I can still remember, as a wee boy, sitting on a bench on the promenade in Largs, along with my Dad and my Grandpa Aitken, watching the steamers queueing up, and learning to identify them!

In the fifties, vast crowds awaited every cruise-vessel, coming by car, excursion bus, and train. The rivalry between Castlevecchi's "The Moorings" at the end of Largs pier and Nardini's further up the prom was at its height. Both were fine examples of thirties' architecture – glorified cafes, indeed, but cafes with style nonetheless! It was coffee, soft drinks and knickerbocker glories of gargantuan dimensions that featured on the menu, together with a mouth-watering range of cakes and ice-creams. Folks made their way from Glasgow and Paisley and all around, to sit in the basket chairs at the much sought after glass-topped tables and sample an éclair, and with great daring, perhaps a Russian tea, and watch the steamers come and go.

Sadly, the Moorings is no more, with its porthole shaped windows and balconies, but the pier remains much the same as it was when it was opened in 1830.

And I can also recall, very vividly, high tea being served to us aboard the Waverley, the tables in the dining saloon adorned in crisp, white linen and the waiters in formal attire. O those halcyon days that are no more, sadly!

Largs has, of course, still retained its strong connection with the Cumbrae ferry.

Whereas Dunoon, Rothesay, and the other Firth Resorts catered for the masses of visitors from the large conurbations in the central belt, the development of Arran as a holiday spot followed rather different lines. It became the paradise for the middle classes from Glasgow and further afield. In 1892, the future Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, brought his wife and family to holiday in Lamlash. In that particular year, Caledonian Steamers boasted Glasgow to Arran in 80 minutes! Today, the average journey by train and car ferry is two hours and ten minutes!

In the early days of the steamers, Lamlash was the most favoured port of Arran, not just because of its situation in a deep bay, sheltered by the soaring mass of Holy Isle, but also because it had a fairly substantial stone quay which could be used conveniently except at Low Water. Now, of course, there is no pier there and the pier office, complete with its fine clock tower, is now a private dwelling.

As I sat in the garden of the Drift Inn with my holiday companions, enjoying an afternoon refreshment, I pictured in my mind's eye, all that bustling activity of yesteryear.

Back in the late nineteenth century, the minister of St John's Church in Ardrossan, invited a fellow minister, the well-known Scottish scholar and poet, The Revd Dr Walter Chalmers Smith, to come and preach at a special service.

In his invitation, the parish minister emphasised the splendour of the view of Arran from his manse windows. Dr Chalmers Smith, who was minister at the time in the Tron Free Kirk in Glasgow, accepted the invitation to come to Ayrshire, but on his arrival Arran was obscured by torrential rain. The following morning dawned bright and sunny, but Arran was still obscured, this time by thick mist.

Dr Chalmers Smith sat and contemplated the view from the Ardrossan Manse and reflected on it, and as he did so, he realised that what had happened was rather like his awareness of God.

He knew that Arran existed, but was hidden from him.

It was his faith in God that God existed, but that He was also hidden from him.

So he took out pen and paper and wrote the well-known hymn which we all love.

“Immortal, Invisible, God only wise,

In light inaccessible hid from our eyes....

Thy justice like mountains, high soaring above

Thy clouds which are fountains of goodness and love...

All laud we would render, O help us to see

Tis only the splendour of light hideth Thee.”

The Hiddenness and the Mystery of God. That theme recurs frequently in the Bible and in later Christian experience, right up to our own day.

When Moses, in the Book of Exodus, draws near to God to receive the Tablets of the Law, the Ten Commandments, the Lord said to him, “...thou shalt stand upon a rock, and it shall come to pass that while my glory passeth by....I will cover thee with my hand while I pass by...and my face shall not be seen.”

Throughout the Book of Psalms, the Hiddenness of God continues....” How long, O Lord, will thou hide thyself for ever?...Why standest Thou so far off, O Lord, and hidest Thyself in times of trouble?”

And when we pass into the pages of the New Testament, the theme of God's essential Hiddenness continues.

"No man has seen God at any time," wrote St John.

And in the twentieth century, did not C S Lewis ask why it has to be that against even our most desperate and anguished prayers, the gates of heaven always seem slammed shut by a God, silent and hidden?

The Hiddenness of God has troubled even the great saints and preachers of the Church down through the generations.

None of us can ever capture God and say all that there is to say about Him. Beware of those Christians who seem to have God all neatly tied up in a box, those who are sure of all of God's thoughts and ways!

God is so great that in His mystery and power we can think of Him only in symbolic terms, in picture language.

The renowned preacher, Dr Harry Emerson Fosdick, for many years the minister of Riverside Presbyterian Church in New York, once said, "As the great oceans of the world are real to me by the water around my small island, so God is real to me by what little I can see of Him and of His ways."

The late Professor Willie Barclay of Glasgow University was able to see God in the great mystery of order and structure and purpose in the universe, so complex a creation that points to a Creator.

Others have seen God in the beauty of nature, in great music and great art; others have seen God in holy places; others have spied Him in holy lives; others in the faces of the poor, the hungry and the oppressed.

"See God where you can," said Willie Barclay, and where down the centuries many, many millions of people have, above all, seen God, has been in the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who one night in a question posed by the disciple Philip, replied quite simply, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father."

Dr Chalmers Smith saw God in the hidden hills of Arran, and he captured it so superbly for us in the words of the hymn.

The Revd Fraser R Aitken, Locum Minister