

17th August 2021

Face to face

"For I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved."

Bible, Genesis 32:30

When the Old Testament's Jacob "wrestled" with God at Peniel before he went on to effect a reconciliation with his brother, Esau, he described the experience in the words quoted above. "I have seen God face to face", he said, and lived to tell the tale. What does it mean to "have seen God face to face"? Does it happen now? Oh, yes it does ...

I reflected recently on the idea of a "ticket" for Communion, an "only those and such as those" invitation to the Lord's Table. When I visited Iona Abbey for the first time in 1971, and experienced the worship offered by the Iona Community, I was blown away! Here was the antithesis of dull and serious Presbyterian worship. Here was vibrancy, relevance, colour, light, language, music and the beginning of an awakening in me. It was the start of a journey of discovery about the meaning, purpose and delivery of worship. And this was never more apparent than in the celebration of Communion on the last evening in the Abbey.

Tables had been placed down the centre of the Abbey choir area, with benches on both sides. With the benches and the two rows of choir stalls behind, and the addition of arcs of seats at either end of the choir, there were three circles of seats round the Communion tables – *round* the tables ... No high altar, no one seated in the nave, everyone, *everyone*, had a place at the table, side by side and face to face. It was a thing of meaning, wonder and beauty for a young man. It had an impact on me which, fifty years later, still gives me tingles up the back of my neck.

When the wine was being shared, passed from person to person in large, pottery goblets, I caught the eye of a lady sitting opposite me on the other side of the table. She was smiling at me, and I smiled back. Two strangers across a Communion table exchanging smiles. Two people welcoming each other. Two people at one in the sharing of the Sacrament.

In the smile of an unknown sister, in shared Communion, I could say with Jacob of old, "I have seen God face to face." I had seen God, and, with Jacob, my life had not only been preserved, but made completely new.

A prayer for today

Smile at me some more, Lord, when I need to feel your welcome. Amen