
Letters to a Young Episcopalian: Thin Places

This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.

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Dear Anna,

Your pilgrimage to the Holy Island of Lindisfarne sounds like a wonderful experience.

I can still remember walking barefoot through the mud at low tide to get to the island. The line of poles marking the way made me think of Saints Aiden and Cuthbert, and all of the other pilgrims who have traveled that path over time. The northeastern coast of England is a special place on its own, but the island—with its history of evangelizing monks, illuminated manuscripts, and Viking raids—does feel like holy ground.

It's interesting to me that there are places where people seem to find God more easily.

To borrow a phrase from C. S. Lewis, it's as if you are more likely to be "surprised by joy" there. You are more likely to lose yourself in them and desire God more. The Irish call these places "thin places," as if just being there puts you closer to heaven and more within God's reach.

I recently found myself in an unexpectedly thin place.

I had gone to the funeral of the father of a friend of mine. The death was a merciful one in many respects. My friend's father had been suffering from illness for a long time. Still, as you know, actual loss is often more painful than you think it is going to be.

The service was in a Protestant church, so it lacked the structure and trappings of liturgical worship that I identify as signaling that you are on holy ground. There were no soaring arches or stained glass windows, no vestments or candles or altar linens. There would be no Eucharist or even any familiar prayers.

Yet, as we sang *Amazing Grace* and *How Great Thou Art*, as we listened to stories about my friend's father—how much he loved other people and how much they loved him—and as I thought about all of the homemade food that would appear for the feast in the fellowship hall after the service, I realized that I was indeed on holy ground.

This community loved and cared for each other in a way that made Christ's presence unmistakable. I forgot about all of my observations of their space and liturgy, and started paying attention to what they were paying attention to – their celebration of their communion with God and through God with each other.

I shouldn't have been surprised.

The presence of Christ is the ultimate thin place.

I guess that I just had to experience it to know that it was true!

Your affectionate uncle,
Ames

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