

The 'Pearl of Great Price' and what's beneath

A recent return visit to my primary school (I was helping them design and create an outdoor teaching space) sparked memories of my time there. So much has changed – new buildings, pupil involvement in school governance, colourful corridors bedecked with the children's work... but the school hall, whilst seeming a tenth of the size it did when I was small, was in every other way exactly the same.

It's the school assemblies I remember most clearly. 200 children and teachers squeezed into what now looks like a pint pot were treated daily to expositions of the parables by the stern but secretly kindly Miss Hart who would stalk across the front of her captive audience unravelling the moral of Jesus' tales. As if the significance of these daily sermons needed further to be underlined, at the end of each assembly we would be treated to a Chopin étude played with sublime ease by the talented Mrs. Garrison, music teacher extraordinaire, on the old upright piano in the corner.

It's perhaps no surprise then that the parables so often rehearsed to us, each time with the exact same explanation, stuck in the mind. Terrified of shuffling too noisily in our places, rooted to the hard floor, we none of us had any choice but to imbibe these special stories so that by the end of seven years' worth of repeats their words and meanings layered themselves onto our impressionable minds and greeted us on subsequent hearings like old friends.

I may not have turned out to be the most devout adherent to Christianity – in fact I'm quite dubious about any kind of doctrine (you don't have to be sceptical to be a Quaker but it helps...). However, over the years I've found the parables bubble up in my consciousness, prompted perhaps by life events and changes in the wind. The tale that keeps popping up for me recently is that of the 'pearl of great price', in which Jesus describes a man who sees a jewel worth more than anything else he owns. The man sells all his possessions and buys the pearl, knowing that nothing he will encounter will ever outstrip it in value. A caricature typical of Jesus' amusing metaphors, this fellow stakes his living on one thing, going against conventional wisdom by putting all his eggs in one basket.

I'm not sure it's such a good idea to throw all caution to the winds for a trinket; but this misses the point perhaps. What the parable is saying is that there are some things - ideas, opportunities, experiences – which outrank all of life's former certainties. And I think the reason this parable keeps hovering in my consciousness right now is that I've just sold up and moved to just about the most delightful place I could imagine. Airton, Malhamdale, the Yorkshire Dales and this great region as a whole is where I want to be. The chance to support Airton Quaker Meeting in offering a quiet, creative and welcoming space both for the Malhamdale community and the wider world is equally appealing.

But there's more to any 'pearl of great price' than the shiny exterior. However perfect its glossy coat is, a pearl contains a little piece of grit and is built by the reaction of the oyster to the resulting discomfort. A reminder that life is never perfect but that challenge and hardship can inspire astounding creativity. The beauty we see in this valley didn't happen by some instantaneous miracle: it's the result of thousands of years of human effort laid upon millions of years of natural upheaval and evolution and continues to be shaped by both today. None of that effort should be taken for granted or romanticised; and as for the grit, as far as I can tell it's all part of the magnificent picture, along with the muck, tourists and the surprising number of BT Openreach vans dotted around the country lanes... Everything contributes to the unique character of Malhamdale – the 'pearl of great price', an irresistible jewel of a place whose care is entrusted to all who live or visit here.