

This place is awesome. This is nothing other than God's House. This is Heaven's Gate" Genesis 28:17

Sermon for an Evensong in Thanksgiving for the Restoration of St Anne's Birch Chapel, Smith's Cove. August 9th, the 10th Sunday after Trinity at 4pm. Lectons: Psalms 84 & 85; Genesis 28: 10-22; Revelation 21: 2-7; Collect, *Book of Common Prayer* page 689.

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"This place is awesome. **This** is nothing other than God's House. **This same** is Heaven's Gate." I have declaimed Jacob's words with emphases, present in the Greek and Latin texts, because what surprised him, and must surprise all of us, is the reality of God's presence in a **particular** place, **this** place, **it** is none other, **the very same** is God's house. This is where God is met.



That St Anne's Chapel is such a place is testified by the memorials which surround us, to which another will be added this afternoon, and by the generous

support given by St Anne's neighbours, so to speak, in order that we can experience God's presence together here again. For this holy place, and for that generous support, and for all those who helped restore this Chapel, we give thanks.

That the God whom we worship here could and would dwell in a particular place is astonishing, awesome. We are told that, when dedicating the Temple he had built in Jerusalem, “Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD...spread forth his hands toward heaven: And he said, LORD God of Israel, there is no God like thee, in heaven above, or on earth beneath,...But will God indeed dwell on the earth? behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have built? (2 Chronicles 6: 22-27) All three of the great monotheisms, Jewish, Christian, Islamic, with their uncontainable God have this question constantly forced upon them, and sometimes for all three, they answer it with a resounding NO, and the destruction of images seems the demand of holiness, iconoclasm can seize the faithful for centuries, and we witness it terribly in the Holy Land at present.

Happily for us, the Christian YES to Solomon’s question is given in the dedication of this Chapel, St Anne is the mother of the mother of Jesus, and so we have the Incarnation, the union of God with a particular human, our Lord Jesus Christ before our minds. That union is the ground of all other particular unions and presences of God with us.



In one of the churches with the greatest depictions of the life of St Anne (the Chora in Istanbul), Mary, the Mother of God, is named “the Container of the Uncontainable.”



“The Container of the Living” Chora Monastery Istanbul.

Her Son, facing her in the icons, is called “the Container of the Living”. Together

they receive the worshipper.

St Anne is an unusual dedication for an Anglican church, although the most important Anglican Church in Toronto, artistically speaking, is also consecrated to her. Its great dome and the supporting walls are covered with paintings by Canada’s most famous artists, the Group of Seven.



“St Anne’s Church, Toronto

Anne is the patroness of Quebec and of the Mi'kmaq people in our region. It is likely that those who decorated this Chapel with Birch, associated with the native people of this place and whose present community extends into Smith's Cove, had them in mind when they dedicated this House of God to her. The builders wished harmony with the particularity of this place, with its people and their natural setting. This is the spirit which still pervades here. There is a communal reverence, maintained in the harmony of buildings, people and nature, which should be a model. And, indeed, it was modelled in this region in the past and, as Pope Francis has reminded us, it is urgent that we recreate that harmony again.

A particularity of which I have become conscious since I undertook this talk is the connection of members of this congregation with one of the greatest Canadian authors, a man who lived and died thirty minutes from here. I had been reading the works of Ernest Buckler, had visited the little Anglican Church he attended, and paid my respects in its cemetery to his remains. The next Sunday I discovered cousins of his who are among us here this afternoon. I mention him because his writing is through and through a record, a celebration and a deep spiritual emersion in the harmony of people and place in and under God in Nova Scotia, and especially at this end of the Annapolis Valley.



In 1973 he wrote the text for a book of photographs of Nova Scotia which I acquired recently from Syracuse New York – Ernest Buckler got around. He had degrees in Philosophy from Dalhousie and the University of Toronto, and his biographer and greatest fan was the President of UofT. His prose is poetry and its characteristic is the so-called “pathetic fallacy”. He reflects human feelings and emotions into nature and nature’s characteristics into the human.

For example, describing place and people in Nova Scotia as a whole, Dr Buckler wrote that its likeness to the heart saves Nova Scotia from insularity: “The arteries go out to the Main, but the beat is all of itself. Sometimes it seems self-contradictory. It is grounded in the sea, but rooted in the land. Its features are as varied as those of the body.

As the hand is entirely different from the eye, so is the ripple of breeze weighted with light, that shot-silks the strawberried grass in the peace-rivered Gaspereau different from the hippopotamus rocks the elemental sea fumes against in a thunderstorm at Peggy's Cove.

As the throat is entirely different from the lung, so is the everlasting shudder of Time in Port Royal ... different from the Now-light in the eyes of children swimming in the meadow brook when the last load of hay they've raked after has been landed in the sweltering barn.

Yet as the body is "one", for all its variousness, so is Nova Scotia. Its capes, coves, lochs, bays and harbours jigsaw its coastline as if whoever was its architect had let his pencil stray without direction. Yet it remains a whole.

Its mountains take on no Cabot lordliness. They chat like uncles with their nephew valleys. Even the rocks have no stoniness. Houses (though their eyes may be as different as brothers' from cousins' or great-aunts') agree with each other, noddingly, and swap kinship the day long."

And so he sings on of "impervious pavements" and "hearts on the latch", of "the somber sea" of men shocking "the living slumber out of giant maples with their gleaming axe blades before they fell them in a sweep majestic as the fall of empires, their muscles sterner than bone in the frozen day."

The inside and the outside reflect each other. "In Nova Scotia, no man can but see (whether he sees what he sees or not) the shape of his thoughts and feelings in print, so to speak, almost everywhere he looks or hears:...

The gusts of longing for someone gone that bend the heart so low no sigh can do anything to exhale them, in the stretching fields that shimmer the greener for the very nowhere-ness in them of the one who was once your everywhere.

The gull-shaped thought in the thought-shaped gull.

The sheen of health in the bluejay's wing....

The bound of joy, in the sound of the sun-up nails being driven into the concurrent boards in the house the man is building for his family in the sight of the tidal river."

(*Nova Scotia: Window on the Sea*, text by Ernest Buckler, photographs by Hans Weber [New York: Clarkson, 1973], 14-17).

There is a great novel, in fact, a work of Christian mysticism, *The Mountain and the Valley*, in which he shows the underlying eternal triad we celebrate here this afternoon. This triad makes the harmony and inner connection of nature and the human, of place and spirit, no "fallacy". Rather it is the greatest of truths.

God created both nature and the human. He created them in harmony, as the story of the Garden of Eden and the place of Adam and Eve in it, declares. He created both of them to be his showing forth: the human to be his image and likeness and nature his appearing: "God is Light and in Him is no darkness at all." (1 John 1.5) Therefore the harmony, the mutual reflection of which Dr Buckler sings is no "fallacy". The Bible teaches, along with the philosophers, and the church has declared from the very beginning that God, nature and the human are understood only through each other. The sympathy is mutual.

And so we can declare with Jacob, we can celebrate and give thanks: This place is awesome. This is nothing other than God's House. This is Heaven's Gate".

Amen. Let it Be. Amen.