

Sermon for Mattins, Baptism of Christ 2020

Exodus 14.15-22; 1 John 5.6-9

I read this week in the Washington Post an article about people who've been watching the astonishingly bad film *Cats* whilst high on psychedelic drugs. As Miss Jean Brodie would have said 'for those who like that sort of thing; that is the sort of thing they like'. And, the stories of these people were quite something: one person reporting panic attacks after Taylor Swift sang *Macavity*; another said they vomited four times, but also claimed to have understood the film on a deeper level; and another even said that it was the most incredible cinematic experience of his life.

Now, I'm not encouraging illicit drug use as a way of spicing up your experience of Mattins, but it does remind me of how drugs have often been used across history to transfigure human experience, not least in religion. In the ancient Vedas, some of the oldest Hindu Scriptures from around 1500 BC, we read regularly of people digesting a plant called soma – a potion they believed was drunk by the gods, giving them extraordinary powers; and those who consumed it in the scriptures had themselves the power to communicate more directly with the deities. Scholars think soma was the fungus *Amanita muscaria* – those red toadstools of the kind you see in Disney movies. This sort of history of religion, popular unsurprisingly in the 1970s, reached fever pitch when John Marco Allegro published *The Sacred Mushroom and the Cross*, which argued that Jesus never really existed, and instead the New Testament was just a collection of myths written by a fertility cult of people who'd consumed all these mushrooms. Now, the almost complete absence of this mushroom from Palestine and Allegro's very dodgy use of extra-biblical texts meant he was roundly mocked. And yet, the desire for mystical communion and heavenly visions, aided by potions or otherwise, would have been well known to the New Testament writers. Many of the mystery cults of the middle east and even some forms of Jewish mysticism sought such visions, not least the so-called Merkabah mystics who meditated upon the chariot of Ezekiel in the hope of their own heavenly ascent.

The apostle John may have been aware of some of these groups and yet his message is uncompromising: you don't need to ascend to heaven; God had revealed himself in flesh, publicly and to all – not through secret knowledge, not through the imbibing of potions, the chanting of secret mantra or the consumption of mushrooms.

Rather, the Word of life is that 'which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands'. Think too of Thomas' encounter with the risen Jesus – by shockingly inviting him to put

his hand in his side, John wants to underline Jesus' bodily presence after the Resurrection. It's underlined in our excerpt from 1 John 5. "This is the one who came by water and by blood...not with water only (that is, baptism), but by his own self-sacrifice, his own blood poured out for our salvation. It's indeed possible that this twin reference is an early pointer towards to the sacraments – the rites of baptism and the eucharist. And, indeed, each of the traditional seven sacraments are remarkably earthy, tied to our bodily life: birth and death, sex and food, sin and sickness. "It's in these most physical activities that God's grace meets us and heals us, grace perfecting nature." (Timothy Radcliffe)

All of which is to say, while mysticism has an important place in Christian history and even drug use in the history of global religion – and let's not forget that incense contains psychoactive properties - the Christian faith is striking in its early proclamation by its universality, by its public and bodily nature. As Rowan Williams has written, "[the soul] needs the gifts that only the external life can deliver: the actual events of God's action in history, heard by physical ears, the actual material of meeting believers where bread and wine are shared, the actual, wonderful, disagreeable, impossible, unpredictable human beings that we encounter in and out of church. Only in this setting do we become holy – in a way entirely unique to each one of us."

It's for that reason we see so much written in the New Testament about how we care for and use our bodies; the testimony of the Spirit to Christ's flesh in his baptism reveals to us that our seeing, hearing, touching, tasting and smelling can all be vehicles for us knowing God and through which God might be known by others. That's a bold claim: that as God reveals himself in flesh, so we too in our own bodily existence, can reveal God by our baptism; each of us can be an epiphany to those around us. As John writes in the previous chapter: "those who live in love, live in God and God lives in them" – that's an astonishing claim when you think about it.

So, if you are feeling low about your body, not least after Christmas indulgence and a blizzard of gym adverts everywhere you go, you don't need to resort to either hallucinogenic drugs or indeed watching the film *Cats* to find all life in all its fullness: rejoice that your body is, as Paul writes now, 'a temple of the Holy Spirit' (Romans 12.1). Use it to discover and reveal God afresh.