This is going to sound a bit odd in my English accent, but I want to read you a little excerpt from Alice Walker’s classic book, *The Color Purple*. This is Shug talking to Celie: ‘Celie, tell the truth, have you ever found God in church? I never did. I just found a bunch of folks hoping for him to show. Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They came to church to share God, not to find God.’

Whether you agree with Shug or not her question of where we find God resonates this Sunday. Resonates because of our gospel reading about the 70 disciples being sent to share their knowledge of God in local villages. Resonates because it’s the Sunday after Independence Day when we need to consider where we find God in our national life, as well as in our personal spirituality.

As a child in England I grew up with a very simple, very wrong understanding of Christian mission. Basically, mission was something you did somewhere foreign – not like France foreign but Asia and Africa foreign, where people looked different and had different customs and worshiped different gods. The point of mission was to make those people more like us – and most especially to tell them all they had been doing wrong religiously and baptize them as good little Anglicans.

So that was how I used to see this gospel passage. That the disciples, those in the know, are taking their knowledge about God to those who don’t know God. But I think I was wrong about this passage, just as I was wrong about the true meaning of mission. Because, let’s be clear, mission is never about taking God to places where God is not. That’s a literal impossibility. The most impossible of all impossibilities! As Shug knows all of us bring God with us wherever we go, the Spirit of God is deep in the heart of every human being created in her image.

So I’ve come to a new understanding of why the disciples are told to shake the dust of unwelcoming villages from their feet. The sin of these villages lies not in rejecting the disciples’ understanding of God but in rejecting the disciples. The sin is their failure to see God’s presence in the stranger as well as in themselves. The denial of another’s full humanity because they see God differently from you is something we need to shake from our feet and from our society.

For when we fail to recognize that God is present in an individual or a society then we are free to demonize them. We can judge them less than human, less than us, exploitable and expendable. And then see all the evil we can do. We can enslave, we can conquer, we can massacre:
often shamefully using our Christian faith as an excuse. And to name names, we Brits and white Americans have been at the heart of this dehumanization of others.

We see this evil still tainting this nation, even so long after we have abolished slavery and, at least partially, recognized the rights of indigenous peoples. It lives on in the everyday racism we see around us – police violence against black youths, the disproportionate poverty of African American communities, the fact that we talk about Asian Americans and African Americans and Native Americans but European Americans are just ‘Americans’. There is a soul sickness at the heart of the United States and its name is racism. We need to see this so we can finally change it.

But all is not ugliness in this country, there is also great beauty. There is infinite beauty in each one of us sitting in the pews, in each human being finding God in their own way. To quote Shug from The Color Purple again: ‘But if God love me, Celie, I don’t have to do all that [going to church]. Unless I want to. There’s a lot of other things I can do that I speck God likes. Like what I ast. Oh she says. I can lay back and just admire stuff. Be happy. Have a good time.’

‘I can lay back and just admire stuff.’ I can lay back and look at the beauty of the Pacific Ocean or the grasses caught by the wind on the Marin headlands. I can admire all the many people in this country who believe in an ethic of equality and personal freedom, who approach the world with a spirit of optimism and strive for self and societal improvement. I can look into the eyes of my friends and see the gaze of the divine looking back at me.

We need to take all this beauty, to gather it up, to embrace it, to wonder at it and to give thanks for it. We need to let it give us refreshment and hope, to let it seep into our pores, to let it embrace us as part of itself. We need to see God in it, to see God in one another, to see God in ourselves, to see God in the ones who see God differently. When we do this we find new courage to live into the beauty. Not because we become blind to the real ugliness of the world but because we are able to confront that ugliness from a place of love.

I’m sure you all know the hymn Amazing Grace and the story behind its author, John Newton. How he was that most despicable of human beings, a slave trader, and how he repented and became a tireless advocate for abolition. And you may think that he wrote Amazing Grace after that repentance. But he didn’t. When he wrote that hymn he was still chaining and selling and brutalizing human beings. The freedom he sang of was freedom from the simpler sins of lust or envy or anger. As
Francis Spufford writes in his book *Unapologetic* ‘it’s rather as if a Nazi death-camp guard had had a moral crisis, but over cheating his colleagues at poker, and then continued to come to work stoking the ovens, while vowing shakily to be a better person.’ p37

But that hymn was the beginning of change for John Newton not its end. As he came to see God’s presence in his life so he began to see that life for what it was. Having opened his heart a fraction to the light of divine grace he was finally able to see the true ugliness of the whole inhuman trade. And this opening of our hearts to God is what I hope we do in church each week. Open our hearts to the light of divine grace so we can see ugliness and discover beauty and be transformed. And so we can bring God’s kingdom a little nearer to these United States.

This grace of God is what we come to church to both find and to share. As Shug says, we come to church to share God and to find God in ourselves and in one another. We bring God with us because it is impossible for us to do otherwise. But we also find God here welcoming us in the sacraments we share, in the bread we break and the wine we drink – in the food that transforms us into the body of Christ. And we find a deeper tie than any of creed or nationality or even race, a tie of humanity created and beloved by God, forgiven and graced by God, one people under heaven, one people on God’s beautiful earth.