

The Triumphal Entry, this seminal moment that marks the beginning of Holy Week is an example of Christ arriving, Christ visiting; One of the most notable aspects of this event, is the way in which he is received by the people of Jerusalem - by laying palms before him along the road, the crowd treat him as they would a conquering and victorious ruler; The shout 'Hosanna', the Hebrew meaning of which is 'Pray, save us'. In other words, and very importantly I think, they recognise Christ for who he really is.

In numerous ways his Holy Spirit still visits us today. Sometimes we need him to visit as a friend and comforter, sometimes as a teacher and guide, and sometimes in a way to simply remind us that, beyond all things, He is Lord. There are clear examples of each of these roles in what Matthew tells us Christ does following his arrival. Firstly he clears the temple; he is an angry and even violent judge, turning over tables and chairs and condemning many of those present as robbers. In the very next verse however, he is healing the blind and the lame, showing his endless love and compassion. And then the following morning, in a striking display of pure Godly power, he curses the fig tree which withers before the Disciples eyes.

A more recent and remarkable encounter with the Holy Spirit involved Field Marshall Sir Francis Festing (IMAGE), a senior commander of allied forces in the Far East during the Second World War and beyond. I was fortunate enough to work with his son Matthew who was Sotheby's regional director in Northumberland. Despite rising to the highest rank in the British army Francis Festing was not a conventional soldier - he did not do formality, his ADC observing that he would often arrive on parade looking like an unmade bed. But when it came to actual soldiering, he had few equals - in the heat of battle he was always in the midst of the action and could often be heard encouraging his men by their first names, all of which gave rise to the lasting nickname of 'Frontline Frankie'. He was also a man of enormous faith. In 1942 he was appointed commander of the 36th Indian Division and would go on to lead them throughout the Burma campaign. One morning prior to the division's departure from Bombay, Festing woke at dawn after a troubled night's sleep and decided to go for a walk along the beach. He prayed for strength and wisdom and courage in the huge task that lay ahead but, ever the pragmatist, he knew that, even if the campaign was ultimately successful, it would come at an immense cost. He walked on with a strong sense of foreboding; but having gone a few steps further he noticed a wave break on the shore and deposit something on the sand. He went over and picked up what turned out to be a 17th Century wooden carving of Christ on the cross. This extraordinary moment obviously did not remove the challenges and hardships that lay ahead, but it did confirm beyond all doubt, that he would not be facing them alone.

On a rather less dramatic scale, but in a similar vein, Reverend Jon wrote a few weeks ago in church prayer about how, on one of his Transforming Trinity visits, a parent presented him with a £5 note, it was a donation from their ten year old daughter who had seen the booklet and wanted to help. That £5 is stuck to Jon's computer as a sign of God's favour and a source of encouragement; Through the Holy Spirit, the lasting worth of that modest contribution, far exceeds its monetary value.

These are, I hope, two inspiring moments; encounters where the Holy Spirit is easy to recognise; but what about the times when God seems distant? When our thoughts and feelings, combined with particular events in our lives, lead to us to conclude that God is ignoring us... and our prayers.

When we suddenly feel, very much on our own. It is a feeling even our Lord Jesus Christ experienced, screaming from the cross 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me'. We can easily be distracted by our own earthly concerns and readily be swayed by public opinion. Returning to our Gospel reading, I wonder how many in the crowd that welcomed Christ with rejoicing were, within a few short days, part of the mob demanding his execution. So what do we do when God goes quiet?

Well, I am hugely interested in Nasa and the moon missions. For me the Mercury, Gemini and Apollo programs, with their numerous setbacks and tragedies, are one the greatest examples of human spirit, endeavour and endurance. A few weeks ago NASA posted this image on Instagram (IMAGE). These are known as 'The pillars of creation', vast columns of gas and dust in the Eagle Nebula, which is part of the Serpens constellation; they are so-called because they provide the building blocks for new stars. Each trunk is roughly five light-years long, and as the scientific amongst may know, a light year is just under 6 trillion miles, meaning these columns are some 30 trillion miles high – just as comparison, the circumference of the earth is a rather poultry 25 thousand miles. Even more remarkably, the pillars of creation are over 6500 light years from earth, and considering the light from them only reached us early in the last century, they are probably no longer actually there.

The point I am trying to make is that, like so much of God's creation, the complexity, concept and scale of these phenomena are simply beyond our comprehension. And in the same way, the underlying concept that God loves each one of us, that he treasures us as individuals, and guides us if we let him, is sometimes beyond our comprehension. The Godly equation that he uses, to carry out the plans that he promises to have for us – will almost certainly take time, it may take us by surprise, it can often seem harsh, even brutal and can certainly be far from what we think we need. But when our thoughts and feelings deceive us in this way and we think God has gone quiet, it is in that albeit uncomfortable void where our faith can really thrive. And as Christ said on numerous occasions, 'it is your faith that has made you well'.

It is interesting I think to note in our gospel reading, prior to Christ's arrival in Jerusalem, that the disciples no longer, challenge, or question or misinterpret their instructions to commandeer a donkey - at this stage in his ministry, it appears their faith is such that they fulfil his request without hesitation. And in doing so, the prophecy of Zechariah is fulfilled; a prophecy written some six centuries prior to the events that Matthew recounts, just one of numerous prophecies all of which provide further compelling evidence of God's overarching power and influence across the ages.

Our faith is built on the promises Christ makes by his passion; that sacrifice, that perfect oblation, means nothing separates us - not our sin or even death. And it is therefore a faith that leads to the revelation of a deeper truth - that the Holy Spirit does not visit us, because he never actually leaves, he is always there, it's just that sometimes we simply don't recognise him. So as we enter Holy Week let us be open to God's guidance in all its myriad forms, accepting through faith the often difficult truth declared in Isaiah, that 'our ways are not his ways'; and as each of us travel our own individual roads to Emmaus, let us trust that he is with us every step of the way, and accept without question what the Psalm tells, that he is good and his love endures forever. Amen

Michael Grist, 2 April 2023