

Reflection for Easter 3 'The Lord is in this place': Discerning God's presence

It's interesting to think about the situations described in the Bible when God appeared to humans. *'The men and women involved in most of those appearances were not leading necessarily wonderful lives'*, writes Emily Sax in her blog *To Unearth*. *'God did not appear to and approve only those who were in the midst of riches or excitement or favour.'* More often than not these revelations occurred when the persons concerned were in the midst of their ordinary, everyday routines.

Think of Mary, on the day she encountered the angel Gabriel and received the promise that she would conceive and bear *'the Son of the Most High'*. *'Greetings, favoured one'*, the angel says to her, *'the Lord is with you'* (Luke 1). And think of those shepherds out in the fields keeping night watch over their flock (Luke 2), and of the first disciples wearily washing their nets after an unsuccessful night of fishing (Luke 5).

In Genesis 28 we read about Jacob (the cunning trickster, his name means 'deceiver') running from trouble. *'He has the promise of God but not much else'*, Celia Kemp writes, in her reflection series *Songs from a Strange Land*. On this particular evening, he made camp where he happened to be when the sun set, it was nowhere special and there wasn't much there. He grabbed a stone to make a pillow (it was a hard place!!) and weary and depressed, fell asleep. But, as Jacob discovered, this understated spot provided a place for heavenly encounter. *'It seems that heaven and earth aren't as separate as they may appear'*, Kemp writes; *'this "house of God" has a floor of rocky earth and a roof of stars'*. Jacob had an inspired dream that night, in which God assured him: *'Know that I am with you'*. When he awoke, he exclaimed, *'Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it.'*

So, here's my question. If God was with those ordinary folks, and if those seemingly uncondusive contexts could be significant, could the same be said for us and our context? And if so, even though we might be feeling stuck in the mundane, cut off and isolated, might it be time to adjust our stance and expectations? There are certainly legitimate concerns we are experiencing at present, and genuine challenges that come with the current restrictions, these must be named and engaged, however, if we spend our whole time worrying about what we can and cannot do, and about what may befall us, and just endure these days as a trial to get through as quickly as possible, we will likely miss the 'glory' and possibility of this time and find ourselves increasingly restless and dissatisfied, or in the slough of despond.

When we let go of resistance and allow ourselves to be with the situation, and shift our focus from looking for change and excitement to appreciating what is, our perception and experience can transform. The emphasis of the biblical witness is that God is present in our everyday lives and situations, and that it is possible for us to be more aware of this. *'Yet, to discover God's immanent presence and rule, we must move beyond merely going through the motions of daily life'*, Charles Metteer writes. *'Approaching life mechanically and mindlessly, and/or wishing the time away, creates a dullness of heart that interferes with our spiritual perception and discernment'*, (*International House of Prayer Journal*). The invitation for disciples is *'to pay reverent attention to daily life with the full assurance that God does meet us in the ordinary and not just the extraordinary. Our common, routine activities and situations can then become "sacraments" that reveal the mystery of God and His kingdom. Over time, as we gain in our ability to find God in the pleasures and problems of everyday life... we can gain a deep love and respect for God, creation and our own existence.'*

The first letter of Peter is the prescribed New Testament text for reading in this season of Easter. This letter was originally addressed ‘to the exiles of the dispersion’ in Asia Minor (1 Peter 1.1), and while their situation is not identical to ours (they were experiencing persecution), we can perhaps relate to the experience of being dispersed and to some extent exiled. In the opening chapter of this letter these believers are encouraged to prepare their minds for action, to discipline themselves, and to set their hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring ‘when he is revealed’ (13). ‘Do not be conformed to the desires that formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct’ Peter writes (13). Peter’s exhortation is to approach our life with dedication and purpose. To be holy in our conduct is not just to be moral but to be dedicated, to live life (the moment) with awareness of its sacredness and appreciation of its gifts – the grace that is being revealed. So, what disciplines (‘discipline yourselves’, v. 13) assist in this way of being?

I have already spoken about the need to let go of our resistance to the way things are and to appreciate what is. This needs to be an ongoing practice (sometimes minute by minute) as (in my experience) resistance can quickly rise up again and again. There is also a need for trust and alertness – letting go of the fear that stokes resistance and trusting that God is present in our circumstances, as ordinary and unpromising as they may seem, and that if we ‘pay reverent attention’ we will become more aware of the sacredness of the moment. Setting aside time to be quiet and still (inside and out), present, receptive and attentive is vital if we are to ‘share in God’s own vitality’ (Timothy Radcliffe). When our outer world is filled with constant noise and our inner thoughts and anxieties are allowed continuous free reign, it is easy to miss what is there in the moment.

‘Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it’, Jacob exclaimed when he *woke up*. God is everywhere present and mostly we are unaware. How might we become more aware? By practising awareness; choosing to live in the present – to trust, to attend, to savour and give thanks. The present moment ‘is where everything good happens’, writes Daniel O’Leary, it is when God is revealed and we can connect. It is all we actually have. I leave you with a delightful piece from Anthony de Mello’s book *One Minute Wisdom*.

Where shall I look for enlightenment?

Here.

When will it happen?

It is happening right now.

Then why don’t I experience it?

Because you do not look.

What should I look for?

Nothing. Just look.

At what?

Anything your eyes alight upon.

Must I look in a special way?

No. Ordinary looking will do.

But don’t I always look the ordinary way?

No.

Whyever not?

Because to look you must be here.

You are mostly somewhere else.