

It's not often that I'm to be found in the pub at 6.15 in the morning, but if it's for a good cause then I can be persuaded. And it was for a very good cause. Some years ago, while I was a Curate I was involved in what was described as a Mission. A team of people from Westcott House in Cambridge joined us in the six Parishes of our Team Ministry for a period of about a week, running a series of special events designed to tell people who don't usually have anything to do with the Church what it is all about, and to encourage them to be part of it. And the events focussed not on the Churches, but on the schools, community spaces and, primarily, the pubs. So there I was early in the morning perched on a bar stool being interviewed for BBC local radio before going on to a neighbouring village and then another one, all for interviews in the pub.

All in all some amazing coverage preparing the ground, spreading the word about the Mission. It brought home to me as much as anything that we need to be in no doubt about the readiness of people to hear about God and the ability of God to open doors for us if we are able to give them just the slightest push. A phonecall to the local radio station gave us a roving reporter who was with us for over two hours and gave us three separate interviews as well as other mentions during the breakfast programme. A similar call to the newspaper resulted in various articles and pictures (including a rather stylish page three spread in the local paper). Three pubs opened for us at a ridiculous hour of the morning and laid on coffee, with one of them opening again at lunchtime for us to have our photos taken for the paper. Even casual conversations in the street resulted not in the "I'm not interested, clear off" that we might expect but rather "that's interesting tell me more".

The trouble is that it's a bit scary – in fact if I'm honest it's a lot scary. For a start, people expected us to be able to tell them about Jesus. Not about theology, or Church history or the rules and regulations surrounding marriage in the Church of England. But about Jesus and his relevance to their lives. And then, they actually found it interesting. And if people start to take an interest in Jesus and come to seek him in the Church then they're going to want to change it. They're going to want to make it relevant to their lives, to address their issues, to worship in a way that is meaningful to them. And it's very tempting to hold on to our faith, it's ours, we've set up these cosy communities called churches, worked jolly hard on them too, cleaning the brass, ironing the linen, raising money, and there's no way we're going to let other people get their grubby hands on them and ruin all our hard work.

If that sounds a bit of a farfetched and unlikely reaction then let's think about Peter for a moment. Last week he was the man of the moment. "Who do you say that I am?" asks Jesus of the disciples and, as we might have guessed, it doesn't take Peter long to blurt out an answer "you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God". Well done Peter, go to the top of the class.

Absolutely right. Peter must have felt on top of the world. He'd got it right, he'd got Jesus right where he wanted him and there was no way he was going to let go.

So you can imagine Peter beginning to work things out in his mind. He's the man who knows what's what, he's in charge from now on. So you can understand his dismay when Jesus starts predicting that he will suffer greatly at the hands of the authorities. Panic! This wasn't in the plan, this wasn't what Peter wanted to happen at all. Right, we'll soon nip this in the bud. "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." Or, if you'll excuse a rather freer translation, "Now look here Jesus, I know you mean well, but just listen to me – I'll take charge from here on in and we'll have no more talk of suffering, it's glory we're headed for you and me. Now you just listen to me and..." "Get behind me Satan!" Jesus' words cut through Peter's rhetoric like a hot knife through butter. Satan? Can you imagine a more cutting rebuke for a follower of Jesus?

Satan – don't be fooled we're not talking about a little man in a red suit with a tail and a pointy fork. No, nothing that easy to deal with. The word Satan means adversary, enemy. Jesus immediately recognises and confronts an adversary to his purposes, to his father's will. And so too must we. And the more God's plans are allowed to prosper, the more we must expect Satan, the adversary to make an effort to stop them.

I believe that, as a Church we are on the verge of something very exciting. As we adapt and react to our Covid and post Covid world, as we offer a mix of online and in person services, as we try in all things to seek to think missionally, the questions that we have been asked and the answers that we have received tell me that there is a great hunger in our society to hear more about Jesus.

But we must beware of two things. Firstly we must beware of getting carried away like Peter. Thinking that we know it all, that we are in charge and that God will fit into our plans. In our work as the Church of God in this Benefice we must continue to pray for God's guidance and inspiration, that his will may be done. As things begin to happen we must be careful not to take charge, to think that we know it all and that we are in the driving seat. Let us continue instead to pray that God will lead us and that we will have the courage to follow, even if that journey leads us to some unlikely and frightening places.

Secondly we must beware of standing in the way of God's plans. Opposing Satan, the adversary is a painful process because often the opposition comes from within us. Our own pride, our own hard-heartedness, our own resistance to any kind of change or to anything that disturbs our own peaceful little world. The problem over many years is that the Church have not just been poor in spreading the Gospel, we have actively kept it to ourselves. It's not that we

have failed to help others to meet Jesus, more that we have actually prevented others from meeting him.

It's time for that to stop. It's time for us to address the issues which act as an adversary to God's plans and to get in line with them. Of course we get it wrong from time to time. All of us. And I'm not saying that everything that has gone before is bad. Far from it. We have folk in our midst who have been faithful followers of Jesus for 70, 80 90 years, their experience and wisdom is vital to our mission. But we can't just rely on what has gone before. Our faith needs to find an expression in every generation and with the re-think offered to us by Covid and the arrival of a new Clergy team in this Benefice, what we have here is a great and exciting opportunity for the Church to play a part in the lives of people who are currently permanently detached from it and from God. And if we miss that chance, if we don't take that opportunity seriously, then we really are wasting our time being here.

So let our prayer be that we may be followers of Jesus. That we may take up our cross and follow him. And let's be excited about what's about to happen, about all that God is doing in our five Parishes, because if God really is leading us then in the end we can only succeed.