

Ramblings from the Rectory

Dear Friends,

The other day, I was in Ipswich and a gentleman was sitting on the opposite path shivering and holding out a paper cup. He called across to me: "Morning Father". In a rush and slightly taken by surprise, I politely said good morning and walked on, just as the hundreds of other people were doing. After all, I was running late for a pressing appointment!

As I walked through the town, I found that I couldn't shift him from my mind, and still can't.

Apparently, the most recent census of the UK population reveals that those identifying themselves as Christian has fallen to below 50% for the first time. It has been claimed that the number of 'active' Christians who attend church regularly, is far less. However, I am always a little sceptical of measures that are prescriptive in such a way. After all, what do we mean when we say we are a 'Christian'? I wonder if Christmas Spirit has anything to do with it? A spirit of generosity, patience, kindness. A spirit of praise and hope.

Christianity can sometimes be easily misunderstood or confused in people's minds. It is never a purely private affair. It is true that there has been a cultural push to make it private in recent years (to keep it at a safe distance) and this might have contributed to its apparent decline. But that is at odds to what Christianity really is. It is too narrowly prescriptive. Christianity is more a public and life-long voyage that includes a commitment and service to each other, to church, traditions, history and lived experiences, to neighbours and community. It is both creative and symbolic, rooted in history and expectant for the future. It is sometimes described as a corporate dance with God.

The eminent spiritual writer, Richard Rohr, points out that what we have come to think of in our culture as us needing "faith in Christ"¹ should more accurately be understood as us simply engaging in "the faith of Christ." This is more than semantics. Rohr continues; "this is an important insight because it means our journey is not our own. We are all participating together in the faith journey that Jesus has already walked. That's a very different understanding of faith than most people consider. Many people think having faith means "to believe in Jesus." But "to share in the faith of Jesus" is a much richer concept" and far less prescriptive. So, we come together, not to massage our own egos or claim spiritual superiority, but to join in with a humble community all looking to share in the faith of Jesus. It gives us license to say "I may not know how to have faith in God today, but Jesus does!" We all engage in this faith-dance with varying levels of resistance or consent. It's a tango of life and love with all the ups and downs that suggests.

Not unrelated, I have recently had an influx of people asking me why I believe in God? My response is simple:

I have always had a sense of something beyond myself - a guiding force, as it were. I don't think I am alone. I think many of us experience something similar.

I know that on those rare occasions when I am in tune with God, things fall into place. I see God's action in the world, in the most unlikely of times and places - in the natural world, in human faces and human affairs.

I think it was Albert Einstein who once said that "coincidence is God's unsuccessful attempt at remaining anonymous". Without God, the only explanation of why we are here is a series of chance events. If this were the reality, then it would not matter how hard I worked or what good I did, because, in the end, I am nothing more than a random organism that will one day cease to be. I know that we often live as though this were the case, but I believe that both you and I are far more valuable than that.

With God in the picture, we are precious. There is order and direction in the created world and we all have our part to play. What we do matters. An eternal invite with God repeatedly offering his hand to pull us from the quicksand of our own making. And that invite is offered again and again, every hour of every day. In the person of Jesus, we see a God who is concerned for our plight. A compassionate God whose mercies extend to us, even in the mess, even when we get stuff wrong. A God who is in and through all things, bringing balance and redress. A God who speaks into our consciousness, offering us hope!

Returning to my experience in Ipswich for a minute: as I walked through the town, I found God would not let me off the hook and the image of the gentleman sitting on the path with his paper cup kept returning to mind.

So, after about 15 minutes of walking away, I turned around, went back to find him and sat with him a while.

This was a real person with dignity who deserved my attention. His name was Simon (just like the Apostle Simon-Peter, he told me). He had been on the streets two years, ever since he lost his job at the beginning of COVID, got into dept and was then evicted from his home. He didn't complain even though he'd have every right to. Apparently, the night before, a group of youths had thrown freezing cold water on him when he was trying to sleep in an alleyway. "At least they didn't try and beat me up this time", he said. "They often do".

I asked him whether he could find a place in a homeless shelter that evening? He said that he had learnt to avoid homeless shelters because organised crime tended to push drugs and drink on the residents and then trap them in a

¹Richard Rohr, *Great Themes of Paul: Life as Participation* (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2002); Rohr points out that what is often translated in modern Bibles as Paul telling us to have 'faith in Christ' should be encouraging us to engage in the 'faith of Christ'; e.g. Galatians 2:16

cycle of obligation and criminal activity. He said his task for the day was to try and raise enough money for a bedsit that evening.

So, I gave him the money he needed for a bed, brought him a hotdog, a hot coffee and fumbled around on my phone to find the numbers for Shelter and Crisis, the homeless charities, in the hope that they may be able to provide him with more long-term support.

He then requested that I pray for him. Afterwards I placed my hands on his head and gave him a blessing before embracing him and departing. "Thank you Father", he said, "I prayed that God would send me an Angel this morning and he sent you". "No Simon, my man", I said, "he sent you. Just like he sent Simon Peter!"

I guess we were both the angels the other needed in that moment – God moves in mysterious ways!

I was late for my appointment, but sometimes just asking 'what would Jesus do?' is helpful in resetting our priorities.

With every Blessing,

Fr Rob