

The Lord is Here

It was a typical August day. It was noon and I had already taken three services and spoken to over sixty American visitors. The church was heaving with people. At this moment it felt more like a supermarket than a place of prayer. I just wanted to escape. At the back of the church sat a busload of Saga pilgrims, obviously a little tired. They were trying to eat their packed lunches without being noticed. In the south aisle a very intelligent man was standing by the facsimile of the Lindisfarne Gospels and proclaiming his wisdom. He was speaking in a stage whisper so that all could hear and acknowledge it. In the north aisle a group of children were sitting on the carpet and making merry sounds. Their chortling showed they were very happy to be where they were. There were at least 150 people just wandering around, most looking rather lost. There were three mums with buggies in the main aisle. (I am convinced that people with buggies – or supermarket trolleys – tend to display their genetic descent from Boudicca! Anyone who stands in the road is in danger of being mown down.) Someone stopped me and asked, ‘Do you still have services in this church?’ When I told him, ‘At least three every day,’ he refused to believe me, saying, ‘No one goes to church that often.’ I felt I had had enough for one morning. What can be done

with such a madding crowd? With the excuse of lunch, it was time to escape this busy place.

Before I could get to the door, in strode a group of young people. They made straight for the front pews on either side of the main aisle. As there were about twenty of them, they almost filled four pews. After a deep bow to the east, they all knelt except one. This was a pretty young woman who stood with arms raised in prayer. Suddenly, the whole church was silent. The air began to tingle. There was some strange power at work. You could actually feel it. No one in the church dared to move. The children were the first to sense the change and became absolutely still and quiet. The loud speaker ceased from his lecture. The Saga pilgrims stopped eating their sandwiches and bowed their heads. All were being touched by something deep and mysterious. You could actually feel something with your whole being. There was a sense of expectancy in the air. We were waiting for something to happen. After a while, the young woman lowered her arms. The whole group then arose, made a bow and went out. They left a hushed building and people that were aware that something special had just taken place. How long the vibrant silence lasted I could only guess. It must have been at least two or three minutes.

Who were these young folk? What had made them come here and what were they doing in the church? I could not resist following them out and enquiring about their visit. Sadly, I should have been able to guess they were not English. In fact they could not speak English except for one young man. His sentences were slow and thoughtful. 'We are from Slovakia. As Christians, we have a new freedom. To celebrate our new liberty, we sought one of the holiest places we had heard of and came to give thanks to God. Our pilgrimage is one of thanksgiving.'

Needless to say, I was deeply moved by the directness and simplicity of his statements. It was the next sentence that caused me much joy and amusement. 'I hope that we did not disturb anyone.' I could only take his hand and say, 'Thank you. I believe that you have disturbed us all by revealing the presence that is ever with us. God bless you all on your journey.'

I would never see these young people again but what they did that busy August day would remain with me for ever. Without words they had introduced our visitors to the holy and the mysterious. Their faith gave them a confidence, not in themselves but in their God. They rejoiced in his presence and helped others to be more aware of the God in their midst. I am sure they did not need to come to the Island to find God, they knew that God was with them. They did not come to proclaim God, yet their very lives and actions said, 'God is with us.'

Here was I, called to look after a holy place and I was ready to write it off for the day because of the crowds. Was I not in danger of excluding God from the fullness of life, from busyness and human encounter? This group of young folk said strongly, without words, 'God is here. His presence is with us.' They rejoiced in a presence that was part of their daily life. They were not seeking God on the Island, they were here to give thanks that God was with them in their joys and sorrows, in their captivity and in their new-found freedom. Yet some of the visitors to the church that day would remember how these young folk brought God to them. I am sure these young worshippers had no thought of being missionaries. They did not come to preach. Yet, their lives spoke far louder than words. They did not come to talk about God but they did introduce a whole group of people to a presence that day. In many ways these young folk reminded me of the early Celtic saints.

The Celtic saints were said to leave their homes *peregrini pro Dei amore* or *peregrini pro Christi amore*, that is, as ‘pilgrims for the love of God’ or ‘pilgrims for the love of Christ’. This would distinguish them from those who were just wanderers, or in our terms tourists. The word *peregrini* means wanderers or travellers. Because of their different pattern to the stars, the planets were called ‘wandering stars’. For these early Christian travellers it was not wanderlust or the desire to see new places that made them leave their homes and monasteries, it was the call and the love of God. In their journey along the road of life they sought the depth to their own existence and a closer awareness of the presence of God. They would have happily said the words of a modern writer:

God our pilgrimage impels,
To cross sea-waste or scale life-fells;
A further shore,
One hill brow more,
Draws on the feet, or arm-plied oars,
As our soul onward, upward soars.

(G. R. D. McLean, 1961, p. 55)

Pilgrimage is often not just a seeking of God but a response to his call. The journey is not only to find God, it is to travel in his presence and to journey deeper into the mystery and wonder of that presence and love. Every seeker is responding to a call to something higher and nobler, or to an emptiness that yearns to be filled. In fact emptiness and boredom are often a call for us to move on and to be changed. We all know there are greater meanings and depths to life and are challenged to come out of our safety and security. We need to recognize that our restlessness is often the call to look in new directions

that we may discover the presence and love of God which is about us. How well we should heed the words of St Augustine of Hippo, 'Lord, our hearts are restless until they rest in you.'

Sometimes we have to move out beyond the safe and the secure to become more aware of the mystery of our world. Leaving the familiar and predictable for a while gives us a better chance of moving on in our lives. Dislocation can deepen our awareness. We take our wrists for granted but if we dislocate a wrist we realize just how important it is to us. Dislocation can make us appreciate our home and our way of life. The Celtic saints, by living as strangers in a strange land for Christ's sake, were able to deepen their awareness of the reality that they were citizens of another kingdom. By going away from home they discovered that they were *Hospites mundi*, 'Guests of the world'. This did not mean they did not belong to the world, or that they did not like the world. They often showed a great love for the world. But they acknowledged that, for them, it was a transitory place, a place of perpetual change that was only part of their life. They recognized that they were travellers on the road of life. For pilgrimage to be real it has to be a moving experience! The outer journey is a visible sign that we are being moved and changed in our inner being. More important than the place that we are travelling to is our attitude, our intention and the involvement of our heart.

I had a very holy site, the church on Holy Island, to look after and saw only bustle and crowds. A group of young people came and placed themselves before God! Without words they proclaimed the presence of God in our midst. I did not go for my lunch until I had returned to the church and said the words of Jacob, 'Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it.'

There are two Irish sayings that I like: 'It is not by your feet alone you can come to God.' And, 'Your feet will bring you to where your heart is.' Travel for the sake of it can often help you to avoid being a pilgrim. To fill your eyes and your mind with new places and new experiences will not benefit you unless the heart is touched. Here is some advice from medieval Ireland to those that travel to Rome; you could change the destination to any place:

Going to Rome? Going to Rome?
It will bring much trouble, little gain.
Your long journey could be in vain.
The King you seek, will only appear
If in your heart you brought him here.

I have met 'pilgrims' who are wearied with their journey and long for the comfort and familiarity of home. One little Northern lad expressed it well, 'What's here? There's not even a chip shop!' Some are not at home anywhere and so pilgrimage often leaves them unchanged. I see pilgrims reflecting the feeling of Matthew Arnold in his poem 'The Grand Chartreuse',

Wandering between two worlds, one dead,
The other powerless to be born
With nowhere yet to rest my head.

One man reflected this when he asked if he could stay for our evening service. He said, 'I will sit right at the back, I do not want to be involved.' I could not say to him this was not possible. If he was not involved he could not possibly understand what we were doing. We were placing our hearts before our God. We were offering our whole being. The words might sound dull and boring to

an outsider but for us this was a love affair. You cannot really understand a love affair if you have no involvement. Yet God is gracious; perhaps God would touch this man through our words and actions. If the heart is not involved in the journey it will benefit us little. I believe we have dual citizenship: we belong to two worlds and should enjoy them both. Too often Christians give the impression you should turn your back on this God-given world. God has created this world and loves it. If we despise the creation and reject it how can we learn to love the Creator? Take to heart the words of St Ignatius Loyola:

God freely created us so that we might know, love and serve him in this life and be happy with him for ever. God's purpose in creating us is to draw forth from us a response of love and service here on earth, so that we may obtain our goal of everlasting happiness with him in heaven.

All things in this world are gifts of God, created for us, to be the means by which we can come to know him better, love him more surely and serve him more faithfully.

As a result, we ought to appreciate and use these gifts of God insofar as they help us towards our goal of loving service and union with God. But insofar as any created things hinder our progress toward our goal, we ought to let them go.

(The Spiritual Exercises,
The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1978, p. 23)

In order that we may live well, we need to be sure of our relationship with this world and the next. The young folk who gave silent thanks to God did so for the new freedom

that they had in this world. No doubt that freedom reflected their longing for the glorious freedom of the children of God.

Teilhard de Chardin outlines the dangers of a divided heart and mind if we do not love God and the world aright. He suggests that most Christians are in danger of becoming 'distorted, disgusted, or divided'. We become distorted when we deny our taste for the tangible world and make ourselves look at purely religious objects. To do this we need to banish so much of the beauty and splendour that is about us. In denying our natural love for the world we distort the truth about ourselves and our God. The disgusted decide that the world is too wonderful to deny and they turn their backs on God, like the man who went away sorrowing because he had too many riches. They seek to live thoroughly human lives without recourse to any higher being. Yet they know in themselves that there is more to this world and in themselves than they are acknowledging. To deny all mystery and wonder is to diminish ourselves and our horizons. The third group is the most common and that is the divided. They give up any attempt of making sense of the situation; they never belong wholly to God or wholly to things. Such people often live by double standards and are seen as insincere.

We can all experience this division in ourselves at times. There are many times in our lives when we are not wholly there, when we are not giving our attention or ourselves. To travel in body but not in spirit is to be a tourist but not a pilgrim. Yet even a tourist needs to be there; Annie Dillard says, 'Beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will sense them. The least we can do is try to be there'. Sadly, divided people are rarely present wherever they are. To travel in body but not in heart cannot bring us peace or satisfaction. Though we must not forget that

the love of God seeks to break in at all times. God offers himself to us whether we are aware of it or not.

Many of the Christians who want to go on pilgrimage have been detained for a while from their journey. Christians under obligation to work, state or family may not have the freedom of movement they would like. Lack of resources or courage can prevent the beginning of pilgrimage, at other times it can be direct opposition or an anti-Christian environment. Some may even be in prison. Then, like many that have gone before them, they have to make a pilgrimage of the heart. I often suggest to people that they become 'armchair pilgrims'. When we are detained in body we are still free at heart. One prisoner said to me, 'Though my body is in prison my heart is free.' We have a freedom that no one can take from us, we are God's people and he is with us. Nothing can separate us from God or his love. We need to learn to rest in that love wherever we are, to abide in him and know that he abides in us. Then we will know that God is with us wherever the road of life takes us.

I believe that we rarely discover that the world is a holy place until we have found one holy place. Once we find one holy place there is a chance for all to become holy. Sometimes we can choose a holy place and set our sights on going there one day. We can find out as much as we can about that place and its saints. We can have pictures and icons and films about it. If we do this we need to be aware of the danger of fantasy. It is better to discover that the place where you are is holy or at least has the potential for holiness. Let God enter your heart and the place where you are. If you feel that God is far off, remember feelings are liars. 'In him we live and move and have our being.' You are in the presence of God no matter where you are. You are in the heart of God and God seeks to dwell in

your heart. Holiness comes with the territory, for the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it. You belong to God and in a wonderful way, God belongs to you.

There is a lovely legend telling of God after the Fall asking his angels where he should hide. Because man had hidden from God, God will now become hidden. A bright little angel said, 'Hide in the heaven.' 'O, no,' said God, 'for humans will always aspire to higher things and they will find me there.' A second glowing angel said, 'Well then, hide in the deep.' Again God replied, 'Human life is full of many depths and they will surely plumb the depths and find me.' The third angel had been biding his time and felt he was now on safe ground. 'Why not hide in the human heart?' God smiled at the angel and decided to do just that. God said, 'I will hide in the human heart and I am sure they will not ever seek me there.' If God is hidden from your sight, you can still find him in your heart. Learn what the Psalmist means when he makes God say, 'Be still, and know that I am God.' The young people from Slovakia travelled deeper into the heart of God while carrying God in their hearts.

If possible, get someone to teach you how to be still before God. It sounds so easy, yet it is fraught with difficulties. There are as many, if not more, dangers on the journey within as there are on any outward journey. At the very start of the journey there should be a notice saying 'Here be dragons'. To learn to meditate or to contemplate the Presence we should normally have a guide. Books can be of great help, as can music and the spoken word, but nothing can replace the careful guidance of someone who is already experienced in these matters. When we set out on any journey it is important that we know we are on the right road. The surest way to keep on the right road is to travel with someone who has been

down that way before us. This is true of the journey within as well as any other. Yet in some ways, because each one of us is so unique, we need to make the road as we go: our journey inwards is where no one has been before.

We need to see life and its journey as a great adventure and rejoice in its newness and mystery each day.

After my advising caution, do not be put off. Living in the awareness of the presence of God is so life-enriching. I often start my time of meditation with these words, which are attributed to St Columba:

Alone with none but thee, my God,
I journey on my way;
What need I fear if thou art near,
O King of night and day?
More safe I am within thy hand,
Than if a host did round me stand.

Travel in heart to meet your God, knowing that God is there waiting for you. Pilgrimage of the heart is something we can all practise every day.

There are pilgrims who are fortunate enough to travel both in body and spirit and to come to some holy place. When such pilgrims left home they were not always sure what they would find but they felt in their heart that he would find them and be there. The young pilgrims from Slovakia were not seeking God for they knew him. They were choosing a special place in which to give thanks to him for a new stage in their lives. They were rejoicing that the God of their heart was the God of the whole world and that he reveals himself through special places.

Exercises

1 Pray:

Kindle in our hearts, O God, we pray
The flame of love that is never extinguished,
May it burn in us and give light to others
May we shine for ever in your presence
And reflect the light of your glory
Which disperses the darkness that is about us:
Through him who is the Light of the World
Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. Amen

2 Practise being aware of the presence. Remind yourself that God is with you, whoever you are. Try to do this with as few words as possible. Learn just to be there, offering yourself to God as he offers himself to you.

3 The 5p Exercise

One of the ways I use to centre my heart and my whole being on God is the 5p exercise. To actually make the space and desire God is to begin a pilgrimage. It is to turn to God and wait upon him who waits for us. It is a 5p exercise because each part of the exercise begins with the letter P.

Pause, Presence, Picture, Ponder, Praise.

Pause It is important to come with an undivided mind. Stop your activity and your need to be busy. Take time out from your schedule. Be still and quiet and place yourself in the peace of God. Let the stillness begin with your body. Relax. Check your feet, hands, neck for signs of tension. Can you really sit still? Sometimes I purposely tense up my hands, feet and face,

screwing them all up until they almost hurt and then relax them. This helps me to know it is within my power to tense up or to relax. It is within your power to relax, so let go. Let your breathing be deep and comfortable. For a while just watch each breath and enjoy its rhythm. Now relax your mind – this is always harder. Get rid of the angst and the clutter for a while at least. I do not believe you can empty your mind, it has far too much in it to do that. Instead drop into your mind calming thoughts. Know that peace and stillness are offered to you, that God offers himself to you. You may like to repeat the word ‘peace’ or simply say ‘Lord God’ each time the mind wants to wander, and so keep the mind in check. I often begin by gently saying:

Come my Lord, my Light, my Way.
Come my Lord, my Light,
Come my Lord,
My Lord.

Though I know God is with me, this helps me to relax into the Presence that is always there.

Presence We have entered the stillness to free us that we may give ourselves to God. It is important at this stage to seek to give our self to him. We may have come for another purpose, for peace, for love, for healing. God knows our needs. Before seeking a gift let us seek God: put the Presence before presents. Give your attention to God as you would a friend. Acknowledge his presence. Say, ‘Lord you are . . . Lord you are here . . . You are with me . . . You have called me . . . You have asked me to come to you. Lord you are here and I come to you.’ It is good to stay in the seeking of God’s

awareness as long as you can. Remember God is there whatever your feelings. Sometimes all we can say is ‘I know you are there in the darkness. I cannot see you or feel you, but I place myself before you.’

Picture Images are important. This is using our imagination but not imagining, rather in creating important images that will be signs and guides to us. I often choose an image from a song or a hymn, sometimes from an event in the world that reveals the working of God to me. I daily use a passage of Scripture, for here are tested images. For this reason I prefer to choose the Scripture before I start the exercise. Can I suggest you quietly read Exodus 33.12–17.

Picture Moses and the Israelites. They have escaped Pharaoh and are settling into their newfound freedom. They are living in the desert like Bedouin, they have their own kind of security and comfort. This is far better than being slaves in Egypt. They have been here for a year and are beginning to enjoy it. By now, they are familiar with the area around Mount Sinai and are learning the laws of God. God asks Moses to move and to take the people forward to the Promised Land. If they are to enter the Promised Land they will have to leave this place and comfort for the deeper desert and the unknown. Moses is not too sure. To leave security and comfort and take great risks for a promise is asking a lot. Will the people be willing to go with him? Like many, Moses is willing to do God’s will but he is not sure what God’s will is. He is not sure where God wants him to go. God does not offer him a map: he does not even offer a guide. He offers himself. He reminds Moses that he is ever present and rest is found in him: ‘I myself will go with you, and I will give you rest.’ The reaction

of Moses is wonderfully human: 'If you were not going, do not even think of asking us to leave this place.' God then assures Moses of his abiding presence and that he will go with the Israelites.

Try and picture this scene of Moses at prayer. See him struggling as any human would with the feeling that it is time to move. Be aware of his anxiety and fear of the unknown. He has no certainties. He is not sure of the people's reaction. Will they follow him? Neither is he sure of the journey he should take. In his life there are no securities except that God is with him and will be with him wherever he goes.

Ponder How often do we let comfort and security prevent us from moving on? Most of us prefer the familiar and the safe. Do we see living in the Presence as a call to adventure, to be a pilgrim for the love of God?

Are there signs of unrest, boredom or frustration in your life and can you view them as a call to move on or at least to change your present way of life? How will you know what God wants of you if you do not spend time talking to him and waiting upon him?

Sometimes the impulse for movement is totally outside ourselves. If our work comes to an end or a loved one leaves us, if we need to move house or alter what we are doing we are being compelled to change. There are times when we do not seek the desert yet we find ourselves in it, or the desert within us. Then we need to know we are not alone. We need to know the abiding presence and love of God.

Praise Rejoice that ‘we dwell in him and he in us’: that God never leaves us nor forsakes us. You might like to repeat the words attributed to St Columba:

Alone with none but thee, my God,
 I journey on my way;
 What need I fear if thou art near,
 O King of night and day?
 More safe I am within thy hand,
 Than if a host did round me stand.

Or end with the words of the hymn:

Guide me, O thou great Redeemer,
 pilgrim through this barren land;
 I am weak, but thou art mighty;
 hold me with thy powerful hand:
 bread of heaven,
 feed me now and evermore.

Open now the crystal fountain
 whence the healing stream doth flow;
 let the fiery cloudy pillar
 lead me all my journey through:
 strong deliverer
 be thou still my strength and shield.

When I tread the verge of Jordan,
 bid my anxious fears subside,
 death of death, and hell’s destruction,
 land me safe on Canaan’s side:
 songs and praises
 I will ever give to thee.

(W. Williams, 1717–91; Welsh,
 translated P. and W. Williams)

- 4 Know that God seeks your love and offer yourself to him throughout the day.

Lord:

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
my soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
for the ends of being and of ideal grace.
I love thee to the level of every day's
most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.
I love thee freely as men strive for right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.
I love thee with a passion put to use
in my old griefs, and with my childhood faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
with my lost saints – I love thee with the breath,
smiles, tears, of all my life!
And, God, if thou dost choose
I shall love thee better after death.

(Elizabeth Barrett Browning, adapted in
The SPCK Book of Christian Prayer, 1995, p. 61)

Eternal God, the light of the minds that know you,
The joy of the hearts that love you,
The strength of the wills that serve you;
Grant us so to serve you that we may truly love you,
So to love you that we may freely serve you,
To the glory of your holy name.

(Fifth-century Gelasian Sacramentary)

