

‘Jesus is coming – look busy?’

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Introduction

One of the many things that I love about moving to Wales is how the countryside undulates! Having always lived in relatively flat places, I now inhabit a world of wonderful valleys and hills. I’ve taken up cycling in a more serious way and enjoy labouring to the top of a hill or coasting along a ridge and finding a whole new vista opening up, perhaps a whole valley I didn’t even know about. Sometimes I drive along a different road from usual and enjoy the different perspective on what is becoming familiar (such as taking the back road from Newtown the other day, and having to stop and check the map because I didn’t recognise the hills from a distance...).

The value of a quiet day is the chance it offers to step back and get a fresh perspective on our routine - or even discover some kind of ‘hidden valley’, an unexpected place of refreshment. It can be crucial for staying energised in our work, because if our routine continues unbroken, week after week, month after month, we can feel overwhelmed by detail and start to lose our grasp on what is most important not only in our work, but in our relationships with friends and family and – crucially – with God.

Advent is traditionally a time for reflecting on the second coming of Jesus to wrap up earthly history and make visible the kingdom of God that is for now hidden. Our response to this may reflect something of the title for this quiet day (which was taken from a fridge magnet slogan): ‘You say Jesus is coming? Better keep our heads down then’. We may feel so overwhelmed by the busyness of the Christmas season that we fear we cannot afford even to stop to catch our breath, because the next task is already looming on the horizon. The danger of such responses is that we may stagger on until just after Christmas lunch and then realise that we have lost any sense of who or what we should have been celebrating, a kind of ‘is that it?’ moment.

Here is a chance, then, to pause and ground ourselves once again in God; having done this, all being well, we will feel better able to go on and continue to give out...

Session One: *Doing the work of God*

Any kind of Christian ministry tends to be fuelled, at least initially, by ideals and more than a touch of heroism. We may feel we are on a mission to change the world or at least transform our bit of it; depending on our age and experience, we may even be convinced that we can actually do that! I grew up in such an atmosphere, with not only a father and brother who were both ordained, but with all four grandparents spending years as missionaries in East Africa, sacrificing conventional career opportunities, financial security, and in some cases their health for the work of God. In my own line of publishing, I admit it feels more world-shaking to edit books on faith, reading the Bible, prayer and related issues, rather than fishing, badminton, or soft furnishings (which are, of course, perfectly good in themselves!).

The flipside of this sense of mission or destiny is – sadly - disillusion. Things don't work out as we'd hoped, for whatever reason. Yes, we are doing the work of God but we find ourselves hampered by lack of money, time, and (perhaps hardest of all) indifference, the response that says 'That's nice, if you like that sort of thing, but it's not for me...'. I may publish what I consider to be a life-changing book on prayer but most people would rather read the latest offering from Jordan (and I don't mean desert spirituality from the Middle Eastern country, either). As we reach mid-life, in particular, we may look back over the years and wonder if we took the right decisions along the way, whether it has been, in the end, worth it.

It can be daunting to stop and ask ourselves 'What's the point of what I'm doing?' We may be afraid to frame such a question in case we conclude that it is all, in fact, pointless, that we are wasting our time. But if we never ask the question, it can still haunt us, rising up to trouble us at a dull point in the day or when we wake in the middle of the night. If we pause to check out the foundations of our work and ministry, we can actually find blessing in regaining something of a 'big picture', hill-top perspective.

We can ask ourselves: 'what does it mean for ME to "do the work of God"?' 'What is the specific nature of MY calling?' And over time, the answers to these questions will change, as our life circumstances and priorities change. Such huge questions are inevitably too big to wrap up in a few minutes but as we ponder them, the following thoughts may provide some useful context:

- The importance of obedience

There is much emphasis these days on self-realisation, which is in many ways a good thing. Accurate self-knowledge can help us to make the most of our gifts and find a context where we can flourish. In the past, 'self-denial' was too readily prescribed to some and not others – women, for example (witness the small numbers of women artists, composers and even writers in earlier eras) or the poor (we no longer sing the *All Things Bright and Beautiful* verse about 'the rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate'...). Having said that, the risk today is more of forgetting the importance of obedience, that our lives are not our own but the gift of God. We must consciously – and prayerfully and humbly - offer ourselves to

God's service each day, asking that he will lead us to the work that is ours alone to pursue, drawing on who we are, what we've learned about ourselves, what inspires us and so on.

- The importance of mindfulness

We should be mindful that we will never know the full extent of how our lives have affected others. So often this becomes clear only after somebody's death, when an obituary may give a full picture of all that they have achieved. Indeed, somebody may tell us how 'your sermon/that conversation with you/that meeting changed my life' – and we may not remember it all! Accordingly, it is important that we cultivate an attitude of openness to the prompting of God's Spirit, the 'quake' in our hearts (characteristic of Quaker spirituality) that should (with discernment, of course) prompt us to speak or act. If we are open to the opportunities that come our way, a chance encounter may end up changing somebody's life, although we may never hear of the consequence. Maybe that is what the 'judgement of God' actually means: that one day, in the loving, forgiving presence of God, we are finally granted understanding of the full impact of our lives in the world – in terms of good but also in terms of harm. The context for such understanding remains, however, that loving, forgiving heavenly presence...

- The importance of sustainability

If we do not cultivate a sustainable way of life, we run the risk of ending up like a dried-up pot plant, soil so desiccated that it is unable to absorb life-giving water. Sustainable ministry is rooted in knowing ourselves, our strengths and weaknesses, but also what sustains us and what drains us. Some relish pastoral encounter while others are energised by preaching a sermon. Some delight in getting on with admin tasks, others in brainstorming with a group to generate ideas for youth work or whatever. Sustainability also means ensuring that we leave space in the diary for having fun, in whatever ways we most enjoy and that are possible in our current circumstances. We should also ask ourselves from time to time whether our work is actually making inhuman demands on us – and whether, in coping with such demands, we are in danger of forgetting that we are actually no more than human.

Food for thought

From the Bible: 'Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.'

1 Peter 4: 8 – 11 (NRSV)

For reflection: 'When the Lamb breaks the seals of the book of the true history, we shall find that all the fruits of history have resulted from the unacknowledged reign of the saints. We shall discover that battles have been less important than the cry of the angry and the distressed calling upon God, the plea of Job and so many like him, and the publican's prayer of faith...' (Olivier Clément: *On Human Being*)

To do (if you want)

- What do you consider your best achievement?
- What do you consider your biggest failure?

Bring both before God in prayer. Then wait and see what emerges in your heart...

Now do the same for:

- Your greatest hope
- Your worst fear

Session Two: *Living as the children of God*

How many times have we prayed ‘Our Father’, ‘Ein Tad’? The Gospels show Jesus bringing the fullest revelation of God as Father to the world, but of course such imagery runs through the Old Testament too, with God imagined in different places as both father and mother figures. It is useful sometimes to stop and reflect on the implications of such language, of what it means that we can know God as a loving heavenly Father. Some shy away from what they consider overly intimate language about God. Asking ‘do you have a personal relationship with Jesus?’ a common enough question in some parts of the Church, can sound as unlikely as asking ‘is Jesus your boyfriend?’. Does the idea of a heavenly Father mean that God can be considered our ‘best mate’ with whom we can chat away (as I have sometimes heard people describing their prayer life: ‘so I says to God and God says to me...’)? By contrast, apophatic (from the Greek, ‘to deny’) spirituality, particularly important in the Eastern Church, is characterised by the view that God can only be described in terms of what God is not, because the divine is beyond all human categories and language. This can correct a tendency to over-anthropomorphise God, but can also end up feeling a bit chilly and remote...

The truth of the matter is that we can fake intimacy with God. We can give the impression to our congregations, friends, and even family members that we ‘know God’, or at least talk confidently of knowing where we stand in relation to God but secretly we know that we are stuck in a place of bleakness and emptiness, perhaps even enduring a ‘dark night of soul’. Poignantly, this was revealed to have been the situation of Mother Teresa of Calcutta. She continued serving, caring, and witnessing to God’s love over many years, but with no sense of that love for herself.

Alternatively, we may have managed successfully to deceive ourselves that we have a strong and active faith, that all is well – and then life happens. We endure bereavement, break-up, illness, whatever... and we look within and realise our inner emptiness for the first time.

One of the many wonderful paradoxes of our faith is that we can sum up the good news in a single Bible verse (John 3: 16, for example) but at the same time be aware that what we are doing is encountering the infinite God. We never come to the end of God; we can never encompass all there is to know and experience about God. At the start of our Christian journey, we may have only a tiny, brittle faith but it can grow and change as we grow and change through our lives. Such growth and change involves re-examining our ideas of the God revealed to us as Father, because we cannot hope to understand what it means to be God’s children if we do not bother to explore more of God. This is a vast (infinite!) subject but, as before, here are some thoughts to provide context for reflection.

- We can trust

The God we seek to know is not a random nature spirit nor yet an unknowable force. It may be ‘a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God’ (Hebrews 10:31) but our God is revealed supremely in the person

and work of Jesus as well as across the whole of Scripture and also in the experience of God's people down the centuries, not least in our own churches, as we gather for worship week by week. We can learn so much of God from one other, especially from those who are further on in faith than us. This is one reason why meeting to study the Bible together is so important for building a healthy local church, not only because it teaches us more about God but it enables us to share our experiences of God's faithfulness, and our joys and sorrows. Such sharing involves a willingness to be vulnerable – which can be hard – but so many riches will be discovered in the process.

- We can yearn

In Jeremiah 29:13 – 14 we read: 'When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord...'. It is almost as if the Lord is playing hide and seek with his people! They will only find him if they long for him, and we too must be intentional about learning more of our God. The Desert Fathers (and Mothers) from the third century onwards went into the Egyptian wilderness to pray, reflect and seek God, freed from any distraction – as people still do today by joining religious communities. It's easy to think 'I can't do any such thing... I'm too busy, too tied up with prior commitments' – but we can seek God wherever and however we are able, remembering that he never forces himself on us. At the same time, we may look back over our lives and realise how God drew near to us in all kinds of ways, as in the Victorian poem *The Hound of Heaven*. He waits for us to look up and notice that he is there beside us.

- We can persevere

My old school motto was (in French; I grew up in Jersey!) 'let us persevere'. It didn't mean much to me at the time, but now I find the idea of perseverance a vital one. As we continue the way of Christian discipleship, God's Spirit works within us, transforming us into the people that we were always intended to be, which is (fortunately) how our Father already sees us. The traditional term for this process was 'sanctification' and if we are honest, we will be aware of how far it has to go as far as we are concerned. Today's media tends to focus on the 'instant makeover' of the garden, the house, the body or whatever, but deeper change takes time and at times it will be far from comfortable. It has to touch deep-rooted things in us if we are to experience lasting transformation and healing. And it can feel like the gentlest, most loving touch of God – about as gentle as a gruelling course of chemotherapy, making us feel a very great deal worse before we begin to get better. But in all this, whether the experience is tender or excruciating, we must remember that we are not alone. God himself, through his Spirit, is with us as we persevere on the journey.

Food for thought

From the Bible: 'See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us

is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.'

1 John 3: 1 – 3 (NRSV)

For reflection: 'The actual longing for God is not a human invention; rather it is put there by God. The longing for God is already the very presence of God.' (John O'Donohue: *Eternal Echoes*)

To do (if you want)

- How do you picture God? What mental image comes to mind? Something like your old headteacher? A High Court judge? A king or president? A kindly – or cumudgeonly - grandfather? An elemental force such as wind or fire? A mountain – or the sea? Ask yourself how that picture might have formed and how it might need to change to encompass more of our infinite God.
- What aspect of God as revealed in Scripture most touches your heart and why? Think of his justice, mercy, love, patience, power, faithfulness... Also, try and identify what aspect you find hardest to come to terms with (and why).

Session Three: *In the light of the kingdom of God*

In this concluding session, we will pick up on the thought from our first session about the importance of mindfulness, of learning to live with a 'kingdom perspective'. We can be mindful of the fact that we are living and ministering right now in the kingdom of God, under the reign of God that was inaugurated by the death and resurrection of Jesus, even though that kingdom, that rule is still in the process of being revealed on earth. Yes, we are doing God's work but it's not up to us alone.

Throughout Scripture we read of a coming 'Day of the Lord' when wrongs are righted, faithfulness rewarded and the glory of Lord revealed to everyone. As also mentioned at the start of the day, Advent is the time set aside in the Church calendar for remembering that one day Christ will come again, a thought that caused problems in the life of the Early Church (see Paul's letters to the Thessalonians) because believers felt that if the Return was imminent, why bother working? And here we are, two thousand years later, still living with mindfulness of this final return, because we hold the promises of God to be true.

Living with an awareness of this heavenly kingdom perspective can sustain us in both our personal lives and in our work. There are three ways, in particular, in which it can do this:

- By saving us from despair

If we are willing (and no doubt even if we are not – see the story of Jonah), God uses us for his purposes, which are vaster than we can imagine. We may be daunted at the scale of the task before us – the small size (and increasing age) of congregations, the lack of money, the demands of buildings – and wonder how God's purposes can ever be achieved. Knowing a little history can be very helpful here: we may say or hear others say 'The Church isn't what it used to be' but we don't have to look back many centuries to realise that that is a very partial picture. For example, the area round the Hafod estate near Aberystwyth was so lawless in the eighteenth century that the clergy fled. Back in the Middle Ages, the parish of Llangurig was asset-stripped by the Cistercians who had taken charge of it, leaving the church building to fall down altogether, so that there was no place to worship for miles around. Looking back to the 'Age of the Saints', we remember the many individuals, whose names are still commemorated in the names of Welsh churches, who settled down in a locality to witness to God's love and draw people to faith,. And of course when we think back to New Testament times, the Church started with just 12 hand-picked people... Looking further afield, we should reflect on how the worldwide church has exploded in growth so that now Christians come from Africa and elsewhere in the developing world to minister in the UK. History can save us from despair if our own circumstances are challenging!

- By sustaining our sense of purpose

Misreading the book of Revelation can lead to assumptions about 'the wicked earth being burned up', while 'good people are snatched up to heaven'

(referring to the particular theological error known as ‘The Rapture’). In fact, what we read in Revelation is a description of the city of God coming down to a renewed earth, echoing imagery found in many Old Testament prophets in relation to the promised restoration of Israel after the exile. In the Second Coming, however, it is far more than a literal, physical return and rebuilding; it is a shift to new and eternal dimension, the final revelation of the glory of God. And this gives us our purpose now: to work to reveal that glory in and through his church, Christ’s body on earth, the first stirrings of the whole movement of heaven coming to earth. It may sound highly implausible, but our ministry in our own local churches is an infinitesimal but vital part of the revelation of God’s kingdom. Week by week, day by day, we work to help others glimpse a bit more of that kingdom and that glory – and connect with it themselves.

- By reminding us of our true home

Our true home, Scripture tells us, is in our Father’s house – and that does not refer to something far off, in either temporal or spatial terms. It is a way of speaking about being in God’s presence which is right here, right now, if we are tuned into it. ‘Tuning in’ may make us think of searching the airwaves for a radio station, but God’s presence is far more than a narrow frequency that we stumble across if we are lucky. It is about true reality, what is really going on in the world. God is at work and our privilege is to join in with that work. So how do we go about attuning ourselves, developing and maintaining awareness of all this? The popular phrase, drawn from the classic Christian text, is ‘practicing the presence of God’, cultivating an attitude of the heart which begins in prayer and can end in simply resting in God’s presence. Developing such an attitude, such prayerfulness, is the task of a lifetime but even so, we should not think of it as a chore. It is our response to God’s invitation, saying ‘yes’ to the divine offer of a relationship of love and eternal commitment.

Food for thought

From the Bible: ‘...the word of the Lord is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness. He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord... Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him. For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm... Truly the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine. Our soul waits for the Lord; he is our help and shield. Our heart is glad in him, because we trust in his holy name. Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us, even as we hope in you.’

Psalms 33: 4, 8 – 9, 18 – 22 (NRSV)

For reflection: ‘To begin the day with prayer is to discover anew the compass that will lead us home throughout that day – and tomorrow to discover it again’
(Andrew Jones: *New Daylight*, July 4, 2012)

To do (if you want):

Bring before God the communities for which you care – or for which you share responsibility. Prayerfully try and identify three (or more!) places/groups/events where you sense God in some way at work. These may have little or nothing to do with the church but even so demonstrate something of the values of the kingdom. Give thanks for what is happening and prayerfully reflect on what you can do not only to encourage that work but show how it connects with God's love for the world.