

ON THE BEACH

Where is God?

It may have happened to you. My best guess is that, in truth, in one way or another, we all know what it's like. The day hasn't gone as we'd planned! The people we set out to visit were all out or otherwise engaged. The people we tried to call were already talking to someone else. The phone kept ringing so the tasks of the day never got the attention they needed. The internet went down, the car wouldn't start, you forgot your keys or locked yourself out!

We've all had those days when nothing seemed to go to plan, and then when we get home, the washing machine won't work or the oven won't turn on. Perhaps, sometimes, we have days when we say, "I should never have got out of bed!" Sometimes it's just the day that doesn't go as we hoped or planned. Sometimes though, there are bigger things going on, and a day when nothing goes to plan is really the tip of the iceberg.

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It felt to them like everything had gone wrong. So, the answer was to go fishing – that at least they understood. And by morning they'd have something to eat and something to sell. In the absence of Jesus, who had been their leader for the last three years, Peter, it seems had taken his place. So when Peter asked: "Who's up for some fishing?" the others all went along. It might even do them some good, going fishing. The old familiar sounds and smells of the boat and the lake and the fish. Here was something they did understand, and night fishing was the best.

But it did not go as planned. The way John writes it, he emphasizes the frustration of the night – they caught nothing. No breakfast, no sales. John tells us it happened at night. John tells us some other things that happened at night: Nicodemus came to Jesus under the cover of night so as not to be seen by anyone (John 3 v 2); Judas deserted Jesus in the dark (John 13 v 20); the

resurrection morning began in darkness (John 20 v 1) and the disciples were hiding in fear of the Jewish leaders at night (John 20 v 19)

Perhaps some of us recognise the darkness and what it feels like to inhabit it. John uses it to paint the picture of what is going on here for the disciples, and maybe we find ourselves in this story with them.

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As the morning begins to dawn, there’s someone on the beach, but perhaps the light isn’t yet good enough for the disciples to recognise who this person on the beach really is. Maybe you know what that’s like too. People helpfully tell you God is close, but in everything that’s going on for you, you find it hard to see him.

We love to rush to the extraordinary catch of fish that comes later in this story. We love to emphasise the deep and profound truth that Jesus steps in and performs a miracle for these battered disciples. We love to notice that Jesus turns up when the disciples are struggling in all sorts of ways and intervenes for them.

But, I wonder, do we see a slightly unsettling truth about Jesus? He didn’t come to them in the night! Have you ever noticed that or thought about that? Jesus let the disciples fish all night and catch nothing. Surely, he could have saved them the pain and frustration of a whole night’s fishing without catching a single fish?

Jesus, it seemed, arrived with his own fish – he was cooking fish on the beach, while they were still dragging their net to the shore... and he provided a miraculous catch of fish for them. But he let them fish all night without catching anything!

I’m wondering what you might think about that?

Perhaps Jesus wanted, even then, to teach them something about being dependent on him. Maybe. Perhaps he was reminding them of what he said the first time on the beach, those years before, that they would be fishers of men, not fish. Maybe. Perhaps he didn't have anything in mind as he arrived on the beach in the early morning. Truth, we don't know, and never will know. And that is still true, isn't it? There are things about God's presence or absence that we don't know and never will know.

Perhaps it's true that there are some things we can only learn, when God chooses to step back. Mostly we struggle with that. We'd much rather have the miracle and have it now. Mostly we don't want to experience a whole night of fishing only to catch nothing. Perhaps the most challenging part of this is that God does often, seem to be absent. Psalm 13 begins this way: "How long LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" (v1) The prophet Habakkuk begins his cry to God with these words: "How long LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen?" (v2) Maybe we know what it's like, maybe we pray similar prayers. Jesus himself used the words of a psalm for himself: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalms 22 v 15 – Mathew 27 v 46)

Here's another challenge: Psalm 13, the book of Habakkuk and Psalm 22 all end with praise and the crucifixion ends with an extraordinary victory on a resurrection morning. Maybe, the truth is, there is a difference between the apparent absence of God, and the actual absence of God. But it never feels like that or seems like that during the night. And many of us feel and live in the apparent absence of God.

By any measure, the work of Mother Theresa is remarkable. By the age of 12 she had felt the call of God on her life and she knew she had to be a missionary. She became a nun and a teacher, but in 1948 she gave up teaching to work with the poorest people in the city of Calcutta. By 1990 the work of Missionaries of Charity had over 1 million co-workers in more than 40 countries. Mother Theresa and her work received numerous awards and became known throughout the world. Mother Theresa died in 1997. After her death, letters she had written to others revealed that for almost 50 years she had experienced a complete disconnection from God.

In the beginning she had clearly heard the voice of Jesus himself challenging her to "come by my light." In the beginning she said "my soul at present is in perfect peace and joy." But, within two months of beginning the work she wrote to a friend, 'What tortures of loneliness, I wonder how long will my

heart suffer this?’ Five years later in 1953 she wrote, ‘Please pray, especially for me, that our Lord may show himself, for there is such a terrible darkness within me, as if everything were dead. It has been like this more or less from the time I started the work.’

As far as we know, these feelings never changed for Mother Theresa, she felt abandoned by God, she was, perhaps, fishing all night. Remarkably she found a way to continue her work. Maybe, Mother Theresa tells us something about the life of faith being something about a steely determination when God seems absent. Maybe she never let go in the darkness of what God had taught her in the light.

Perhaps, in truth, we put far too much emphasis on what we can see – as evidence of faith. Perhaps, authentic faith, real faith is more about what’s on the inside - to keep going when God seems absent. And, perhaps, doubt, wrestling, questioning and times of darkness are all what go to make authentic faith.

The disciples had fished all night, and in the early morning Jesus was on the beach, but they didn’t recognise him. That’s not uncommon – for people not to recognise that Jesus is near. The two on the road to Emmaus didn’t recognise that it was Jesus who walked with them. Mary, weeping at the tomb didn’t recognise that it was Jesus who was speaking to her. Many people today don’t recognise that Jesus is near and wants to speak with them. And, maybe, Jesus is near to you, but you have failed to recognize his presence.

There may have been many reasons why the disciples didn’t immediately recognize who was standing on the beach, but perhaps they simply weren’t expecting to see him there, on the beach, at the end of a long, fruitless night of fishing. After all they were in Galilee, and Jesus, the Messiah, would overthrow their enemies and set up his throne in Jerusalem, wouldn’t he? But, just as in the manner of his birth, Jesus came in an unexpected way, no fanfare, or ‘Hallelujah Chorus’, just him, standing quietly on the beach.

Perhaps it’s a challenge we too face today, the challenge that Jesus doesn’t do what we expect. Or, perhaps, the Jesus we expect him to be, isn’t who Jesus really is.

Jesus’ last recorded words in Mathew’s Gospel contain a wonderful promise: “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Mathew 28 v

20). The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that God has said: "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." (Hebrews 13 v 5)

Perhaps we have expectations as to what that looks like in life. Perhaps we imagine what God will be like and how he will be with us. Perhaps too, we imagine what life will be like if God never leaves us or forsakes us. And that can be challenging when our imagining about God turns out to be different to who God is, and what God does.

God's promise never to leave or forsake me is not a promise for a life filled only with fun and an absence of long, dark nights fishing for nothing. I can become disappointed with God as I have imagined him to be. I can become disappointed with God as I expected him to be. But truth is, God often is the God of the unexpected and, in the early morning, he is on the beach, standing alone, ready to meet the disciples.

A few weeks ago, I was really challenged in a phone call I had when I was working as a Chaplain at East Surrey hospital. I was speaking to a lovely man who had lost his wife to cancer. Both were Christians, but her death was felt deeply by him and his church. We chatted about her death, his loss and about faith and church. He told me he was no longer attending the church they had been in for many years. It was his explanation of why that challenged me. I don't remember his exact words, but it was something along these lines: "I can't go there now because you always have to be happy, and talk God up, and be full of the joy of the Lord – and I can't do that." And then he said: "What I need is space, and a church like that doesn't give me any space to be with how I really feel."

I hope that CBC is not like that, because that kind of expression of faith is, I believe, immature. Authentic faith does, of course, have moments of excitement and energy, but mostly, it is lived in the ordinary and through the night, fishing all night, only to catch nothing. Authentic faith can give expression to every season of the soul. Authentic faith has no need to pretend things are great when they are not. Authentic faith is able to recognize that God is not always who we expect him to be.

So, Jesus is standing alone, on the beach, as he comes to his disciples again. He has neither abandoned them or forsaken them.

In those moments as the sun rose after an exhausting night's fishing, the truth is, the disciples were not expecting to see Jesus. But they were about to

experience again that Jesus does not always do what we expect. The deep and profound truth, friends, is that God does not abandon us or forsake us. But our experience of him may not always be what we think, expect or imagine.

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