

St Mary Abbots

Welcome service

Trinity 5 2021

Ezekiel 2:1-5

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

Mark 6:1-13



What did you think of the picture on this week's poster? In case you didn't notice, it is a detail of a painting by Hieronymus Bosch of a man with a staff, bent over, and seemingly on a journey. He is a pilgrim.

And when I suggested it to Leonora, who puts our posters together, she asked whether I was sure I wanted a brown and yellow picture, with no bright colours, and of a sad old man.

I can see why she asked the question.

I wish I could say that I'd chosen it to represent what Rámond and I looked liked as we journeyed from distant Catford with our dog Cuthbert to come and live and work with you here in Kensington.

As we stood at Beckenham Hill station, we weren't carrying much – just a couple of overnight bags.

But as we turned into Vicarage Gate an hour later, on that afternoon a month or so ago, any illusion that we were poor, ascetic pilgrims, like this man, was shattered by the simultaneous arrival of an enormous lorry from Bishop's Move; and they spent the rest of the afternoon unpacking clothes, furniture, pictures, pots and pans, and all the junk from the cupboard under the stairs which we had failed to sort beforehand.

And I spent the whole of the following week unpacking and finding a home for all this stuff.

So much for Jesus's instructions to his disciples to go out '*taking nothing for the journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics.*'

But why does Jesus give these rather harsh, you might think, instructions?

Well, I think the clue might be found in the following sentence: '*Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place.*'

People often focus their attention on the following sentence, where they are told to shake the dust off their feet of any place which refuses to hear them.

But before that possibility is mentioned, there is an assumption that some will welcome the disciples, and that they will stay long enough to build relationships.

And the reason, I think, why they are told to take nothing for the journey, is to ensure that they are dependent on those to whom they are sent.

They could have gone to stay in the first century equivalent of a Travelodge, taking all they needed with them.

But would they then have got to know the men, women and children they were there to build a relationship with?

Certainly not as well as if they were living with them, depending on them.

But in depending on their hosts for everything, they made themselves vulnerable. Yes, they came with a gospel of repentance to preach, as well as casting out demons and anointing and healing the sick.

But relationships are two-way things. And if they had had nothing to receive in turn, no needs of their own, it is hard to see how lives could have been transformed by their presence.

Before being ordained, I remember the kind of ideals we would share at theological college, as we planned, with more than a hint of vanity, to go out and change the world, giving all of ourselves to this lofty calling.

The reality is very different, and it is almost a cliché to say that most people are more transformed by those they seek to help than the other way round. It is a cliché however, because it happens to be true.

In Catford I'm sure I was more transformed by people's generosity of spirit than any of the people I sought to help. By those who came to ask me how to pray, but who were clearly more faithful in their prayer than I was.

By those who came to use our food bank, thanking us profusely, and who would then return a couple of weeks' later, having spent a large chunk of their unemployment benefit on a bag of food for us to share in turn with others.

And by those in the very worst pain or grief that it is possible to imagine, but who would nevertheless tell me that '*God is good.*'

And this is obviously not a lesson just for priests.

We human beings have a habit of trying to cocoon ourselves from pain, including the pain of others. If we can afford it, we put tall electronic gates at the end of our drives, we have blacked out - or at least tinted - windows in our invulnerable-looking Range Rovers; and if we give to others, we try to avoid catching their eyes.

And yet Jesus's instructions to His disciples tell us I think that we must instead sit with the poor and those in need as equals. Sure, we must try to help as we can, but not from our largesse with the equivalent of loose change. For in the eyes of God, and of His Church, no possession is absolute.

Just as we pray to God in the Eucharist, '*Of your own do we give you.*' And similarly, because all that we have we have as gift from God, our brothers and sisters actually have a positive claim on us.

I remember volunteering at a homeless hostel in Cambridge, and being a little put out when people started complaining about the options available (and not just my cooking!). Surely they should be grateful for what they get? And then someone else pointed out sagely that expressing their preferences for food was the only exercise of agency they had.

Whether or not we actually look like the bent over pilgrim, '*with nothing for the journey except a staff*', that is how we are in God's eyes.

Our attempts to make ourselves invulnerable or superior to others do not work with Him.

And so, far better also to give them up with those we live alongside too.

Instead of averting our gaze, feeling generous for tossing a few coins, try sitting down on the pavement alongside the next person who asks you for money and asking their name, and then listening to them for a while. And not sitting there feeling

terribly smug for being so generous with your time (I know, I've been there); but sitting there thinking you might learn something, because you almost always do.

And such habits and attitudes only grow once you start. That is why Jesus tells his disciples to stay in one place at a time: building relationships, breaking down our own walls - let alone those of others - takes time and hard work.

Aside from the general run of services and pastoral work here, my job description includes outreach. Outreach in a church however is something that can only be done together. And it is something that will only work if we go out into our community ready to be changed ourselves.

We may not see ourselves as having very much in common with our bent over pilgrim. But I hope we as a church can go out into our community, together and individually, to listen to the needs of those around us here and further afield. And, whether we look like this pilgrim or not, to go out '*with nothing for the journey*', simply to listen, and to offer what we have to those in need of it; and in doing that, to offer back to God what He has so graciously given to us. Amen

Fr Christopher Rogers