

EASTER 6 2019  
St David's Eucharist

'There is a purpose in every journey that is hidden from the traveller.'

So said the German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

There's something there about the deeper meaning of our lives, which perhaps escapes our attention much of the time. That's maybe because it's a feeling we're aware of at particular moments more than others, those moments of insight which take us below the simple business of getting from A to B or doing a particular job. Both passages today have that sense to them; for Paul it was about an actual journey, for the man at the pool it was about the routine that had taken him there day by day for years.

Let's begin with Paul, embarking on one of those many lengthy journeys of his. He'd been living and preaching the gospel in parts of modern Turkey - Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and Antioch in Pisidia. From there they had set out heading generally NW towards the coast.

We don't know why that was, except they had a feeling they shouldn't go west to the big towns on the W coast like Ephesus.

Nor do we know which way they went exactly, we are just told they had the sense of the Holy Spirit leading and guiding them. The result was they ended up near the North coast.

Whatever, it was a journey of several weeks on foot and they must often have wondered why they felt they were being drawn in that direction, because it wasn't an obvious route in that mountainous terrain. But then the point of it is revealed in the vision we've heard described this morning; the Macedonian saying, 'Come over and help us.'

So this is a lead-up to the crucial moment when Paul crosses the Aegean into Europe, ending up at Philippi. Then as now this sea passage was a hugely significant boundary which brought the Gospel to a new part of the world which would in time become more significant than the places it had come from.

Something else happened in Troas too. Somebody else joined Paul's party. Up until then the account speaks about the events in the 3rd

person, but then, in verse 10 it switches to 'we'. Although there has been much debate about the reason for this the simplest and most straightforward answer seems to be that this was when Luke joined the group. For him the rest of the book he's writing is part of his own biography; it's what he did and what he saw for himself.

What took Luke to Troas, one wonders? Who knows whether the need to record and write this account was also part of the purpose of *his* journey, the result of which is both a wonderful gospel and a lively account of its diffusion into the wider civilised world.

Let's have a brief look at the Gospel now and see what hidden purpose may lie concealed there. Here we have an account of one of Jesus' healing miracles. Why Jesus went there or why he picked out this particular man amongst the many who frequented the place we can't know, but from that moment on the man's life was changed - and for Jesus too, life began to be shadowed by growing opposition because the miracle took place on a Sabbath.

That day for that man his lifelong visits to the side of the pool had their purpose revealed. It

was certainly known as a place of healing because it seems in previous time it had been dedicated to the god Asclepius, a god who healed particularly those unable to walk because of some crippling disease. But that day it was the place that revealed who Jesus was - the true God from whom all healing comes.

The man himself doesn't seem to have registered it, in fact he seems a bit of a curmudgeonly character - who knows how his disease had shadowed his life, after all?

But others had begun to realise that Jesus was different; the Jewish authorities who were worried by him, and of course readers of John's gospel. Especially those who read it in the original Greek, because the word concealed behind the English translation of the command Jesus gives the man, 'Stand up', is the same word that is later used for Jesus' own resurrection. Here's another sign, John seems to be saying, notice what Jesus is doing he raises people up, ultimately he will raise you to eternal life through his own raising up.

In both these scriptures we are being led into a deeper faith in and understanding of God's underlying purpose for human lives. God always

moves to bring new life, whether to the crippled man at Beth-Zatha or to the outward movement of the gospel itself to reach more and more people.

So what we have heard in this morning's readings encourage us to look in our own lives and see God's hidden purpose at work in them. This means reflecting on why we are here in more than a very general sense.

Specifically, why are we living here in Exeter? What are the decisions that have shaped our lives such that we have come here? What things have determined the path we have taken in life - especially those crucial moments, those times of particular decision or difficulty? Have we had the sense of a guiding hand, not probably a vision like Paul's but just what happened at a particular moment, as it was for the man at the poolside?

The Bible tells us the story of God's interaction with us over millennia and in the NT in particular about how God shared a human life in the person of Jesus and how he gave the gift of the Holy Spirit to his followers to animate and renew them, to encourage and to guide them in their lives. Luke is especially conscious of that gift,

and the Holy Spirit is the real protagonist, the chief actor, in the story he tells, from the Annunciation to the many acts of the Apostles.

That same Spirit is present and active in our lives and in the lives of those around us today; often hidden, but sometimes overt. Two examples I came across recently: the first about a healing and the second about a journey.

Last week I read the obituary of a very charismatic priest whom I once heard speak here in Exeter, and he was indeed a great character and a powerful evangelist. In fact he was sometimes called the 'British Billy Graham' because of that; his name, Michael Green.

With that in mind the obituary told the story of a visit Green made to Malawi where a pastor with an injured leg asked Green to pray for his healing. Green recalled: 'We laid hands on the leg and prayed earnestly... It was instantaneous. He jumped up and started walking, almost dancing around.' God's action always heals, but sometimes it's more obvious than others. There are many who are healed routinely through the amazing skills of doctors, nurses and surgeons.

But the hidden healer is the one who created a body which mends in the first place.

Then there was the programme which some of you may have seen screened around Easter time about a group of pilgrims who'd gathered together to go on a pilgrimage to Rome on the ancient Via Francigena, starting in the Alps. One of them was Stephen Amos, the stand-up comedian. He had begun, like the majority of the group, as one fascinated by the idea of pilgrimage and what has drawn people to go on them for centuries, rather than as a man of faith.

By the end of the journey they are all, if not radically changed, at least aware of having somehow been part of a significant experience - and for more than one person it was clearly a healing one. The culmination of the pilgrimage was, quite unexpectedly, a personal audience with Pope Francis.

Before the meeting Amos says to camera 'I don't think for me, as a gay man, there is any faith that embraces me.' They are all, however, embraced by Francis, and Amos is able to express his reservations about faith to him in their conversation together. Afterwards, Amos, struggling with his emotion, said 'His candid and

honest response blew my mind. He said, “Every human has his own dignity.” That’s what I’ve been searching for for a long time.’

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