

WHAT YOU SEE IS WHAT YOU GET (but do we see enough?)

How was your week? Another one to tick off, been there, done that? Or was it a week of some depth, some significance, and where maybe you bumped into God?

As we answer that question let's look first at Simeon and Anna.

They're a bit of a nuisance really, these two. Creeping around the Temple like a bad dream. You can never shake them off. They seem to spend all their time there, and they're always popping out from behind a pillar with a prayer book. It's a bit spooky actually. Are they real? You want to say to them – get a life! Get out of church sometimes. I mean – what do they do on a day off? You can't see them on the terraces watching Jerusalem United, can you? Or reading the latest romantic fiction (Jackie Collins meets Ezekiel). I guess what you see is what you get – two elderly people addicted to the Temple.

People are always drifting into the Temple – some even to pray. Some are just looking for a friend, and then they adjourn to that little hostelry near the gate. Others sit in the shade and talk – there's always the latest Roman sleaze to catch up on. And there's always people selling things too; always a quick shekel to be made. Plastic models of the Temple. T-shirts – you know the kind of thing: 'They went to Jerusalem and all I got was this lousy T-shirt.' And there's people selling sad-looking turtledoves and pairs of scrawny pigeons. They ask the earth for them too – should be turned out of the Temple! But it's the same everywhere, isn't it? What you see is what you get – people doing ordinary things, trying to get by.

But in the midst of it all there's these two – Simeon and Anna. And there's one thing they seem to ask a lot. 'Have you seen him yet?' they say. 'Have you seen him?' Well, seen who? you ask. 'The messiah!' whispers Simeon, eyes aglow. He says he's been promised that before he goes he'll see the messiah. And then he's gone, peering into the crowd, searching. It's very embarrassing really. Like when that streaker came through last Passover, chased by three policemen and a Pharisee. What on earth is the Temple coming to?

But hold on a minute. What's Simeon up to now? He's gone absolutely still - frozen. Looking over at the main gate. The hair seems to be standing up on the back of his neck. It's only an ordinary couple he's seen, surely. And a baby. They're strangers probably. Look a bit overawed. And a bit lost. Look like they've been travelling for days. Good strong face, the man – kindly, protective, looking after that young wife of his, and their child. Galileans probably – what you see is what you get up there. Tough, straight to the point.

But the way that mother holds her child! You'd think her life depended on it. Oh dear, now Anna's noticed too! She's started to circle them, not too close, as if she daren't come too close. But she's got to be there. Scared, but irresistibly drawn. There's something going on here – they're both on to it.

Simeon – he's moved in now. And taken the child, carrying it like a baby but like a holy object as well. Longing to hold it, but with a kind of wonder. What's he saying – half whispering and half singing? Praying really. 'Lord, let me go now. In peace. Just like you said. Because I've seen it, my salvation. I've seen him, my future, my hope. And not just for me, but hope for the whole wide world. A light for the gentiles, the pagans, everyone! Glory, glory – for you and for Israel!'

What Simeon *saw* is what he got. He saw God's salvation, and so he got it. And so did Anna. They saw the one they'd been waiting for - 'My eyes have seen your salvation.' So that's what they got - salvation. Because what you see is what you get.

So my question is - what do we see? Do we see enough? Do we see deep enough, far enough, underneath enough? Do we see the presence of God in the heart of things? Would we see our salvation if it came up and introduced itself? Or would we still be counting how many T-shirts we'd sold, or how many pigeons? What you *see*, is what you get.

Ours is, in some ways, a very superficial society. If it isn't on the small screen, or set to music, or on two sides of A4, we can't cope with it. We're addicted to speed, instant access, instant results, let's fix it now! And we're hooked on consumerism, shopping as leisure activity, not as need. Indeed the very word 'need' has changed its meaning. Our great-grandparents maybe needed a pair of shoes in order not to go to school barefoot; now our children need a pair of trainers because everyone else has them.

Relationships have become consumer items too. We buy them and keep them for as long as they seem nice and fresh, but then we'll need a change. And what about that terrible President's Club event at the Dorchester last week? Unbelievably exploitative. Rich men 'consuming' women.

What you *see* is what you get. So if we see nothing at any depth, we **get** nothing at any depth. We skim over the surface of life. As TS Eliot said - 'We had the experience but missed the meaning.' We're tourists in the Great Holiday of living. Don't we need to be more like Simeon and Anna in the sense that we need to look, to search, to *see*.

Two of the most important questions we can ask in any situation are: *What's really going on here? What's the deep story? Who's doing what, to whom, and why? What are the power dynamics here? And the other question is: Where is God in all this? Because God is always present, he doesn't know how to be absent - he's present in compassion, in encouragement, in mercy, in confrontation, and always in love.*

Those questions apply as much to our current dilemmas with Brexit or Trump or North Korea or climate change or Artificial Intelligence or whatever, as to our own family lives or church life. What's really going on **here**? Where is God in all **this**? As Christians we've got to ask these deeper questions. In a soundbite culture, where wisdom comes in slogans, and if it hasn't been on Twitter it hasn't happened, we need to be a community of truth and irritation, always asking the deeper, underlying questions. If we don't see into the deeper things that are going on, we'll just get the superficial answers and make the superficial responses. What we *see* is what we get.

I find the Jesuit practice of the Examen helps me here. It's a way of looking back and reflecting on the experience of the last day. Rather than letting the day be lost and forgotten, and rather than living unaware of the presence of God through that day, we give space for God to uncover the deeper movements of his Spirit. The simplest way I know of doing this is in four stages. First we ask God to reveal what there is to learn from the day. Second, we look for those times when we were grateful, when we felt most alive, connected, energised, aware of 'something more' going on. What was happening then? What was God showing us through that experience? Thirdly, we go back and look for those times when we felt out of touch, unconnected, lifeless, diminished, anything but grateful. What was going on there? What can we learn about ourselves from that experience? Lastly, we put the next twenty-four hours into God's hands, and pray for an

awareness of God's life-giving presence in what we say, think and do. I'm actually asking those two questions – what was really going on during the day that made me feel like that? And where was God in all that, what was he saying to me?

Simeon and Anna, eccentric though they were, were on to something vital. They were asking the deep question: 'Have you seen the messiah?' They were waiting for the Main Event, looking for God's moment, God's arrival. So their lives were atuned to depth.

Our lives and our culture are usually atuned not to depth, but to the superficial, to surface noise, which misses the depth of things, the throbbing of the deep engines of creation and redemption. We need to be committed to depth, looking under the surface of things. It's not for us to wander through the Temple precincts looking for a friend to take to the pub or hoping for another stalker. The Sun on Sunday is doing that. We're called to look for the messiah, to scratch under the surface, looking for the presence of God.

We have to cultivate the art of holy expectation and sacred seeing. Because what we see is what we get. Philip Toynbee said, 'The central command of religion isn't 'do this' or 'don't do that' but simply 'look'.

And in order to see, to look, we have to slow down and ask the deeper questions. I've suggested two: *What's really going on here?* And, *Where is God in all this?* Two questions that help to make us reflective Christians, and not just passing consumers of religion.

What you see is what you get. So when you see Christ in many places, you receive Christ in many forms. And you begin to enter the Kingdom of God.