

Ever since I refound my faith in my twenties, I have found great enrichment in going on pilgrimages, retreats and quiet days. There is something very rich in joining a prayerful community and sharing in their prayer life and hospitality. But pilgrimages and retreats are not holidays, they can be really hard work, because they are all about increasing our awareness and attentiveness – two aspects of our discipleship that we spoke a little about last week.

But we're not often very skilled at looking for the divine. Take this other short story from the Benedictine tradition:

A monk comes to his abbot, seeking enlightenment. He questions the abbot eagerly and impatiently, firing questions at him. But the abbot says, "Just look." The monk is very disappointed. "I'm always looking," he says sulkily. "No, you're not," says the abbot. "In order to look at what is here, you have to be here, and you are mostly somewhere else."

I guess, life is so busy that we are often somewhere else and fail to be properly attentive.

I remember once, going on retreat to a monastery in Worcestershire. We all gathered in the dining hall for lunch. Served before us, sizzling on a platter with its rich aromas wafting in the air was a roast chicken. Before we began our meal, the Abbot stood up and began to pray. 'Thank you Jesus for joining us at this table and for providing this meal so that we may be nourished by it. And thank you sister Chicken. You have given all that you have so that we might receive the strength we need for another day. As such you have walked the same path as our Lord Jesus, in giving your very life, that we might live. Amen'.

This was all about attentiveness – recognising where God was and the blessings he brings. In this one short prayer, the Abbot had recognised three important truths. First; the blessing we had in being around the common table together in Jesus' presence. Second; that the life of God runs through every living thing. Third; the great sacrifice that the chicken had made in order that our physical bodies might be fed.

One of the central themes that often comes through attempts at monastic living is the ability to recognise God's hand in all things. Often, monks and nuns are encouraged to live in a perpetual sense of prayerfulness, where they recognise God in every aspect of their work, recreation and prayer lives. So if they are gardening, they recognise God's hand in the soil, the water, the plants and even the utensils they are using to do their work. If they receive a new guest, then they are encouraged to recognise the face of Christ shining through the newcomer. If they are driving a car, then God's hand is to be seen in the production of the machine, the resources that have been used to make it work, and in the journey it is taken them on. In such ways, they are encouraged to feel a closeness to God in everything they do, because God is indeed present in it all.

Last week, as we reflected on St John's version of how the first disciples came to follow Jesus, we reflected on how discipleship was less about what we did and more about what we were to be. Or to put it a different way, discipleship was about our sense of being – resting in the spiritual stillness of Christ. This, we suggested, required awareness and attentiveness to our surroundings and God's hand in it. This week, we have a slightly different telling of those same disciples coming to follow Jesus, this time from the account of St Matthew.

It begins with Jesus retreating into the wilderness following John the Baptist's arrest. The arrest of John must have troubled Jesus very deeply, so where better for Jesus to go in order to refocus and still his soul, but the countryside. As he observes nature in all of its wonderful variety we get a sense of him feeling reaffirmed in his calling through the words of Isaiah; 'the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.'

Jesus, we are told, then goes out and proclaims 'repent, for the kingdom of God has come near'.

The greatest testimony that our God reigns is seen in and through nature. There is something very Godlike to be one who appreciates, cares for, preserves and rejoices in living things. When we become obsessed with material possessions and economic gain, something dark happens to our souls. Life no longer becomes our main focus, and it is instead replaced by an obsession for wealth and comfort. As we hoard inanimate objects and work at increasing our numbers on a balance sheet, we are in real danger of ceasing to recognise the depth of our blessings. In the words of Jesus; 'A man or woman cannot serve two masters, God and wealth', 'for where your money is, that's where your heart will be also.'

It is no surprise then, that the first disciples' hearts are not hardened or corrupted, by wealth and personal gain. They are but simple fishermen. These men already have a deep appreciation for nature. They respect the power of the weather, they rely heavily on their equipment and have a passionate care for the health of the aquatic environment and all its wonderful biodiversity. When Christ enters their midst they seem to recognise something familiar in him – almost like something they have

been involved with for a very long time. The first disciples appear to have no trouble in simply stopping what they are doing and following Jesus – almost as though this were a natural progression on from their lives as fishermen on the lake.

After the section we heard today, the next few verses of Matthew's Gospel tell us about Jesus healing the sick and teaching in the synagogues. The healings are, of course, further testimony of his intimate relationship with nature and all living things. But so too is his teaching about the kingdom of God. The two are inseparable. These are examples of how Jesus corrects and cures wherever the divine design for creation has been damaged and distorted.

This week, there has been wide publicity of a recent paper released by Professor Jack Schultz, Professor of Plant Sciences at the University of Missouri in Columbia. He claims that plants can see, hear and smell. Whilst they might not have organs that we recognise as eyes, ears and brains, he observes that plants do in fact exhibit all the same behavioural traits as animals. They fight for territory, seek out food and water, evade predators and trap prey. If true, and it sounds logical enough, what this suggests is that far from being only good for our furniture, plants are as alive and as responsive to their environment as any other living thing. There is a life force in them that is not only passive, but responsive.

Jesus carries within him the life of God. He heals the world through teaching and restoration. He reconciles all things back to the Father. In and through Christ, the whole universe is infused with the life of God. As disciples of Jesus, we are called to recognise God's hand in all things. The very life of God pulsing through the veins of every human, as well

as every tree. If we love God, then we must love each other and every living thing he has made. Not just a passing acknowledgement, but a deep and attentive engagement with everything around us.

In giving thanks for that Chicken, the abbot in that Worcestershire monastery showed a deep and holy awareness that God is in all things. That no animal, plant or object is simply ours to do with as we choose without care or appreciation. We can gaze at the face of a friend, the orange in the fruit bowl, the car on the drive and observe the wonderful hand of God within. In Christ everything is gathered up, healed and renewed, and we see his mark in every part of nature, as well as the stranger who next walks through that door.

Amen.