

“Beautiful church and grounds full of history and decor,..... horrific vicar and church staff, they should be ashamed of themselves!!”

Believe it or not- and I hope not-believe it or not that was the very first review somebody posted on Google of the place of worship where you are now sat.

“horrific vicar and church staff, they should be ashamed of themselves!!”

Somebody posted that. OK, so which one of you was it? And while we're at it who nicked the tin of chocolate biscuits??

I know it wasn't any of you because when somebody first alerted me to that goblet of vitriol flung into cyberspace and dripping off Google Maps I did a little sleuth work and discovered that bit of trolling was the work of a videographer who'd filmed a wedding at St Mary's, in the process of which he was first ripped into strips by Heather and then finely minced by me (I specialise in mincing). Although I didn't agree with the would-be Spielberg's evaluation of the 'vicar' or his version of events- we don't have staff for starters or indeed a vicar- once I'd worked out the commenter's identity at least I knew what the problem was and was slightly less worried that there was a madman out there who'd unaccountably taken a dislike to me. Now this videographer was subjected to the Rector/SPA pincer squeeze not because I have an aesthetic aversion to wedding videos. True I've never seen a wedding video I wanted to watch once never mind again. Except the time the mike picked up my dad's not too complementary running commentary of a Baptist knot tying. Anyway, poor taste is not a crime. We'd soon run out of prison space if it was. The problem was that we had asked this videographer- as we do to all making Nuptials the Movie- to keep still during the service, i.e. not to move around. It is, after all, not Liz Taylor and Richard Burton up there singing *Give me joy in my heart*. He was asked to keep still, and ignored us. We ask all video makers and photographers to not move during a service because if someone or something is moving, that's all you end up looking at. So instead of watching the bride and groom on their special day your dotting congregation just spends half an hour glued to the antics of Trevor who doesn't know how to use the zoom lens as he's moving in for another close up. I've just realised it's my third sermon in a row to mention weddings: the trauma goes that deep...

Anyway, that's the way our brains work. If something moves we can't help but follow it with our eyes. Because, for our own good, we're hardwired to notice what

changes. Our brain is set up to notice change and to very quickly ignore anything that doesn't change. Result: our attention attaches magnetically to whatever out there is fast and noisy. This makes sense. You don't want to be noticing that the grass is as green as always- oh, isn't that lovely, all that green grass every day- and miss the hungry wolf just at the edge of your vision raptly studying the menu. The grass is always there, the wolf isn't: it pays to notice the wolf, if you want to live to spend another day cropping the turf that is. If it moves, it grabs our attention. This is why animals often freeze when they don't want to be noticed or they're scared. Humans do this as well- stay in the seat when the warning light goes off rather than scramble for the exit, which I guess is why you'll be stuck listening to this tedious sermon right to the bitter end. But do keep listening because I'm about to drop the pop-psychology and get to the gospel, which, however much you like jokes about dogs and eyebrows, is the real reason you're here.

So. Just put the preceeding somewhere where you can easily get it again, and we'll talk faith. None of the long cast list that appears scrolling in the credits of the Gospels is there by accident. From the co-star apostles to one-liner cameos, from megastar Mary to the humblest extra eating their 0.02% share of loaf and fish, those people are not just there for incidental colour. They are there to tell us- future disciples- something the first generation of Christians thought we really need to know. Those meanings are often multi-layered: both big ticket faith matters- the nature of God, life the universe and everything- and more personal stuff- what we can, should or might think, believe or do.

So if we look at the tale of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, the events that we remember at this feast of Candlemas, we can see that the voice booming from the clouds take is that Jesus in indeed a fulfilment of prophecies- not only those written in the Scriptures, but also contemporary, even personal prophecies- ones such as the Spirit had whispered to Simeon. These too are now fulfilled. Jesus, the fulfilment of prophecy: that's one of the big gig salvation takeaways from this tale. And away from the epic sweep. we are also being directed to observe closely how the actors in the drama react when they meet Jesus. It's crucial to notice, because this is the most important moment of their lives; and meeting Jesus is the most important moment of our lives. It's vital to know how to respond at that moment. The Gospels try to help us: they show us good models and- sometimes- cautionary tales. Let's enter the IMAX of our imagination and see.

If you'd been in the Temple in Jerusalem for the presentation- I don't know if the Levites managed to slot in any weddings between burning the bullocks and sprinkling the dove blood- but imagine you're there in your fetching fascinator. Imagine you were there and there's no doubt you'd have been distracted by Anna, the prophetess. Your brain would have immediately gone into 'something moving' mode when she fetched up and fixed your eyes and your ears on the old woman running around ranting about a magic baby who was the Messiah. Maybe she'd just guessed the combination for the padlock on the drinks cupboard and had been acquainting herself with the after service sherry. But still. Compulsive viewing. With the best will in the world, Anna would have been impossible to ignore. You probably wouldn't have noticed Simeon, tottering off, apparently looking for somewhere to kip. The Gospel writer's gaze however, refuses to be fixed on the distracting movement: Anna is noted, she's important, and more about her in a moment, but we're kept firmly focused on Simeon, the man who is about to finally lay down the burden of a long life of waiting. Which is great for Simeon, but of course, this is the gospel so there's a message there for us as well. It's this. *Your* wait is over too. Your burden of waiting is done. You have seen that light. Your old life is over: your new life in Christ has begun. It is worth waiting, God comes good in the end.

Lest this focus on individual reactions gives you the impression that our response to Jesus is something that is principally personal, individual, private even, let us turn to Anna. Unlike Simeon who's been consciously hanging on till redemption was revealed; she pretty much stumbles upon the momentous event, and yet she immediately recognises it for what it is- perhaps all that time in the Temple has made her finely attuned to the things of God. Also getting on a bit, her response to Jesus, however, is not 'great, now I can lay down my burdens and watch Countdown till I die.' Her response is to go and tell everybody she can what's just happened, and, like the buzzing fly in the room or the videographer at the wedding, she refuses to be ignored. Here too is a message for us as well. Jesus' commission to 'go, make disciples of all people' is directed at everyone who meets him and recognises him for what he is, everyone who realises what's going on. The apostles and the disciples, yes. John the Baptist and Simeon and Anna. Yes. All the big stars of the Gospel. yes And also the bit part players, the cameos and the extras. Me. And you.

Here's an important caveat just in case you think 'time to leap out of Beddington Parish church and tell everybody about Jesus.' I probably don't need to give that warning. Not your style. But say you decided that today was a good day to go all Anna. Well, yes, you are going to get people's attention. And let's very charitably

assume they won't respond by running away or setting their dog on you. Great. But the 'in yr face' strategy is strictly limited: like anything else your brain keeps seeing, after a while it will become swallowed up into 'what's normal' and become part of the background. Like your nose. Literally in your face but you've long since stopped seeing its there. The usefulness of being centre of attention is quickly exhausted.

But. Just by doing what you normally do, without running out of here in high excitement and thrusting yourself onto the attention of the parkgoers, you may well step out of Beddington Parish church today and *still* tell people about Jesus. If you're taking this whole Christian thing seriously you will be doing that already. By the fact that you've taken the effort to get out of bed and get here to spend a couple of hours thinking about God. By the fact that you give at least some of your time to prayer, to learning more about your faith. By the way you conduct your life, by your concerns, attitudes, ways of behaving towards God's other children. By the fact that, though you are regularly failing at all the above, you *know* you are, and you are still getting up off the floor to give it another go: you have a dedication, a determination, a Simeon-like sticking at it; slowly, ever so slowly, imperceptibly but surely becoming more Christ-like. You might not recognise yourself in that description, but I can see you there. And, you know, as long as you're not hiding all that, as long as its clear to anyone who takes the time to look, that actually, there is something more in your life and that 'more' is your faith, then, perhaps without becoming the demanding focus of attention, you *are* telling people about Jesus.

Stick at it.

It's not yet time to lay down your burden. Stick at it.

And one day, you will hear the words:

Well done, my good and faithful servant.