

Life is rich in its infinite variety. One of the many glorious things about our Creator is that however much we men and women of science think we've got it all tidily arranged and neatly ordered in regulation binders in our filing cabinets God will always pop a half eaten banana sandwich into the drawer.

Such is our confidence in our filing system that when we thought we knew all there was to know about natural history, that much maligned Anglican amateur Paley could confidently assert that we could know God from observing the order and beauty of his works. Fine, but that was something you could only propose, of course, before the widespread knowledge of the fauna of Australia. You might be able to work back to the designer deity from say the grace of a horse or the song of a skylark, but what sort of weirdo would design the duck-billed platypus? Or some of the slugs which thrive in my back garden, or now we're on this subject, those superfast sprinting spiders which seem to have evolved to avoid the sticky end that is the arachnid's deserved lot and are all the scarier for it. The creator's wanton disregard for the Dewey Decimal System in the natural world can almost be categorised as mischief. Yes, every so often you will come across the perfect archetype set in amber- a teetotal priest for example, or an honest politician or a journalist with integrity, but for the most part, we are, as God made us, an unexpectedly, surprisingly, gloriously diverse lot and we don't get what we, with our generally small imaginations, expect.

Few things in life, in fact live up to our expectations. Only if we expect the worst, it seems, will reality even start match our expectations. It is needless to say good to have expectations: if life is a journey, it is our expectations that keep us moving on the track rather than sitting in abject despair on the platform refusing to get on the train. Without unrealistic expectations of happy-ever-after forcing the pace of our personal lives there would, it is true, be fewer divorces but then there would also be fewer marriages that do succeed. Parents of course, have expectations of their children, that they will one day grow to be healthy, happy and good people, and those with great expectations want great things for their offspring: to become a doctor, a lawyer, a prime minister or, go on let's push the boat out, even a vicar. Without expectations- of looking younger or becoming more attractive or being healthier or having a good time or meeting the right person or being admired or doing better and on and on the whole world economic system would collapse, and though its exploitations and inequalities cry out constantly for justice, it is a rare person indeed who thinks the world would be a better place with no economy at all rather than a much fairer one. Without all those expectations that can be confounded, how could we ever take delight in being surprised? Like millions I keep buying a lottery ticket,

in the vague expectation that one day I might win the prize, though I'd be... well excessively surprised if I did. Without expectations where would those delightful surprises be?

Even my dog lives on expectations: that he will get fed when he wants, that anything will become less scary if it is barked at at the loudest volume, that a cat will come down from the tree if barked at, and that, thanks to everyone else's sleepy stupor noisily drinking water at 2 am will not gain him the sharp reprimand it actually merits.

So, some may say that money makes the world go round, the more sentimental insist that it is love that drives the motor; but perhaps somewhere in the engine of the earth there is something furiously pedalling away keeping the little cogs turning and the big wheels grinding that is our expectations.

If we recognise that God is any part of our life, we will have expectations about Him too. Frequently these are unrealistic ones, and God too rarely lives up to our expectations. Though, as with the duck-billed platypus- he's always ready to surprise us.

The Old Testament Bible reading at our Mass today, from the first book of Kings, is a wonderfully piquant case in point. But before we look at it more closely, holding it up to the light, turning it this way and that, let us see where it sits in the wider picture, because this mountainside vignette tells of just one thread in a whole woven extravaganza of expectations. If you're of musical inclinations, this part of Elijah's story is a sort of intricate invertible fugue of confounded expectations.

When we join the story Elijah has had his famed showdown with the priests of Baal. They had expected their god to send fire from heaven but he hadn't: Instead, the God of Elijah had, and then, unexpectedly Elijah had killed them all. Nice guy. Elijah might then have expected the people of Israel and its royalty to have a rather changed view of God and his prophet, but they didn't: in fact tomorrow's dog food Jezebel became even more determined to finish this turbulent prophet off for good. Elijah crawls into the desert expecting to die. But God refuses to fulfil that expectation. So Elijah ends up in a cave on Mount Horeb, and an angel tells him to expect an imminent visit from God. And now, we find our expectations being played with too. There is a huge wind. Any of us raised in the 'Lord of power and might' school would naturally expect that to signal God's presence. But it doesn't. So then

follows an earthquake. That sounds about right. But that isn't Him *either*. Fire? Thunderbolts from heaven? Burning bush? Pillar of fire? That *must* be God. But it isn't. God appears here in the least expected way.

In the Anglican tradition, thanks to the King James Bible we are most used to God's presence in this story being described as 'a still small voice' though our more contemporary reading has 'a sound of sheer silence.' I guess the Hebrew or Greek original is imprecise hence such different translations, but the point is clear. The creator of heaven and earth, the supreme being who holds everything in being appears not as you might expect in a manifestation of power, or destruction or energy, but as quiet and calm. It is every expectation we may have of God turned on its head. God: a gentle breeze?

We expect a god to be powerful, mighty, strong; to intervene in our lives and in the life of the world in recognisable and unmistakable ways; to rain down punishment and plague and earthquake and fire upon sinners and the ungodly; to reward his followers with riches and success and happiness and long life and health, or at the very least a parking space on Church Road. But almost all the time all our experience of God is silence. Not because he isn't there. Not because he isn't listening. Not because our faith is insufficient or our prayers not fervent enough. But because the world is full of very clear and obvious and unmistakable power and might and strength and plague and suffering and punishment and earthquakes and indeed for some happiness and long life and riches and success and *none* of that is God.

God is not a purveyor of party tricks. He is not a tyrant or a sadistic bully or a lavish nepotist. God has absolutely no need to impress, astound or astonish us but He does delight in confounding and overturning our expectations.

Our earthly lives are full of the fiery heat of the human drama, of success and misfortune, of joys and excitements, of passions and terrors, of hopes and dreams, of expectations and disappointments. Just occasionally in the busy tempestuous years of our lives we may feel a gentle breeze blow across the scorching heat of his soul... ..and then we will know that we have indeed met God.