

Sorted, sort of

I recently took the 0847 from Paddington to West Ealing. There were various announcements over the train's PA system, including an interesting variant on the now all-too-common *'if you see anything suspicious call the Transport Police: See it. Say it. Sorted'*.

I usually hear this said over the London Underground's PA system, and often in a bit of a 'cor blimey' voice. I expect you have heard it too, many times. There is no escape.

That morning, on the overground service from Paddington, it was delivered in a more refined voice. More Hyacinth Bucket than Thames Estuary. And what struck me was the slightly different wording. I heard *"If you see something that you are not happy about, contact the..."*.

Well, at that very moment I was looking out of the window at a West London 1970s brutalist sky-grabbing tower block, feeling sorry for the poor souls living in it. I was *not* happy about it. Taking the announcer at her word, I almost got on the 'phone....

It got me thinking for the remainder of that short journey. First about the notion that if we're not happy about something we can, should, ask someone else to deal with it: to get it 'sorted'.

The second, about how good messages, important messages, essential messages, soon become familiar and stale. Even annoying.

It won't surprise you that both these things have some resonance for preachers and clergy in general. It is not uncommon to be expected to 'sort out' something or other from

congregational bust-ups to existential anxieties. And it can be one heck of a challenge to keep alive, to present, witness to, communicate the essential Christian message without it becoming too familiar, or stale, or repetitive.

You, perhaps, have had similar experiences in various roles as parent, teacher, cleaner, health worker or whatever. You have to live with other peoples' expectations that you will sort it out, and your repetition of the essential message (whatever it is) runs the risk of no longer communicating much at all.

St Paul comes over as a person who is forever 'sorting' things and people out. This morning we hear that he meets a slave-girl who had 'a spirit of divination' and her gifts earned her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling.

She responded to something in Paul and his companions: she stuck close to them and repeatedly announced that they had the message of salvation. After (we are told) "many days" this began to needle Paul. (Regular users of the Underground might recognise a similar response).

Paul exorcises the unclean spirit from the girl and "when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them before the magistrates" [Acts 16.19], no doubt citing commercial sabotage and loss of earnings.

This story reminded me of the apparent losses we might have to experience as and when we enter and re-enter the life of faith. The slave-girl had responded to Paul's account of God's

truth in Christ, and that led to fundamental changes in her life. One of them was to be freed from an 'unclean spirit', the very spirit which had made money for her owners and thereby provided her with some (relative) security and status.

If you are a Windows, Android or Apple user you may be familiar with what are called 'add-ons' or sometimes 'plug-ins': extra tricks and tools which enhance (so they say) whatever programme they 'add-on' or 'plug-in' to.

Some of these are really useful. But if you are not careful, all these add-ons and plug-ins may begin to clog up your computer or phone, slow it down, or even react badly with other add-ons and plug-ins and cause irritating time-outs, 'conflicts' and crashes. (I hope the technically challenged are following all this...).

Too often, the adventure of faith is 'sold' to us, or seen by us, as an add-on or plug-in.

The slave-girl (we are not told her name) is simply one of many characters who crop up in both testaments and whose experiences show us that these good things from God are not simply add-ons or plug-ins to an otherwise undisturbed sub-structure.

Homo sapiens are a remarkable species. We are inventive and enquiring, loving and hating and given to much underlying anxiety. Anxiety craves reassurance, and settles as easily for bogus substitutes as for the real thing. It instinctively goes for the add-ons and plug-ins and shuns the prospect of major change.

This may be why crisis and adversity are such successful (but unwelcome) tutors. They break open our shells, leave us vulnerable. It is then that we might see more clearly, hear more distinctly, and embark on change.

The story is told of Picasso that a stranger in a railway carriage accosted him with the challenge, "Why don't you paint things as they really are." Picasso thought for a moment and

replied that he did not quite understand what the man meant, and the stranger then produced from his wallet a photograph of his wife. "I mean, sir" he said, "like that. That's how she is." Picasso coughed hesitantly and said, "She is rather small, isn't she. And somewhat flat?"

We perhaps think that the picture we carry around in the wallet of our perceptions is indeed an accurate portrayal of things as they are. Almost without doubt we're wrong. We too will have a selection of unclean spirits we play host to, and which need exorcising – either by God's grace, or through that carpet being pulled from beneath our feet, or by plain personal effort.

We live amongst much fiction, both internal and external.

God asks you to re-write it into a more truthful auto-biography; to take the flat images this world peddles (and which we often like) and to transform them into something three dimensional, and as perceived by you in your particular uniqueness and from your unique perspective.

Find the Gospel in the story of your own life. Find the things you are not happy with sort them out. By all means ask others for help, but fundamentally, the sorting out is our job. As Picasso no doubt said (or wanted to say) to his fellow passenger, this is really about *how one sees*.

Whatever happened after Christ's crucifixion, the *impact* upon the disciples was significant. We marked Ascension Day on Thursday by listening to Luke's account – and heard of the joy that overwhelmed the disciples. It entered the very fabric of their lives and thoughts; a 'joy' more like a sense of radical connectedness than any mere feel-good stuff. Now we hear about Paul and Silas, the Slave girl, jailers and prisoners; all manner of people who experienced God and whose worlds were changed.

I mentioned the danger of repetitious messages, whether of the public safety information kind or any other kind. Forgive me if you are tired of the one that now follows, but the preacher has little choice but to become a parrot of sorts, and to repeat the persistent claims of the Gospel:

- that the mystery we so inadequately call 'God' has great care for *you*;
- that the greatest mover and transformer is the thing we call love (which is a way of seeing as much as it is anything else);
- that though we may be in the world we are not of it; and that a sceptical detachment from its daily insanities is essential if we are to be bearers to any degree of God's truth;
- that evil (individual, corporate, national and global) is to be resisted and challenged and transformed (mere condemnation does not work and can easily become self-righteous);
- that we have to allow ourselves to be constantly formed and reformed by the Holy Spirit and that this is far more like some great civil engineering project over time than a mere coat of new paint.

It is the foundation and sub-structure of our lives which this God seeks to embrace and enter into and build up. It is our flat one dimensional lives which God seeks to animate and transform.

Don't be troubled too much by the troubles of the age. We are still in Eastertide and *in* hope and *with* hope we celebrate the mysterious meanings of the Resurrection.

And we should look around for this same 'risen-ness' witnessed to in our collective struggles and in our common life. There are always examples of ordinary and

commonplace courage and care shown by women and men facing moral and practical challenges and addressing them conscientiously, in their private and working lives. It goes on all around us. It goes on amongst us here. It always warrants the acclamation *alleluia*.

Next Sunday we shall celebrate the Feast of Pentecost – the fearsome and healing gift of the Holy Spirit given to those first disciples. But that is just a date in the diary, an annual fixture set by those who were at the table when these things were decided.

Every day is a Christmas Day, Good Friday, an Easter Day, an Ascension, a Pentecost.

Let me say to myself and to you – today's disciples – lay hold of this same spirit; join the apostles and Paul and Silas and the Slave-girl and all those whose lives were changed by being open to the Divine. Ditch the idea of faith as some convenient add-on or plug-in and see it more as some kind of 'break through'.

When we see things we are 'not happy with' let's think less of getting someone else to 'sort it' and instead engage with it ourselves.

In the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy (30.19) we find this summons: 'This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses [against you] that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. *Now choose life*, so that you and your children may live..'

Let's choose life.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen.

He is risen indeed. Alleluia.

Hugh Valentine