

3rd Sunday of Easter

14th April 2013

Holy Communion in The Parish Church of All Saints, South Elkington

Finding God

Today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles provides one of the most vivid accounts of a man realising the true reality of God that we have. The image of Paul – the persecutor of the early Church – being struck blind by the sudden realisation of what God truly meant to him is one that has not only given us colloquial phrases such as 'having a Damascus moment', but has, for centuries, affected the way some people see their faith. In particular, since the reformation in the 16th century there have been significant traditions that have seen such a sudden conversion and redemption from past sin as a defining characteristic of what makes one a Christian.

But, whilst such blinding conversions are undoubtedly a reality, I feel that we set ourselves up for a fall if we try to see everyone's relationship with God through the lens of Paul's experience on the road to Damascus. To believe – as some do – that the 'best' Christian is one who has had some single and obvious spiritual awakening or enlightenment is to deny experience of many others, and ignoring other biblical accounts of other ways of finding God that we have heard over the past few weeks.

In contrast to Paul's blinding revelation of God's presence is Peter's constant missing of the point that we find throughout the Gospels. Time and again we find Jesus shaking his head (presumably in frustration!) as Peter misunderstands what is being said or what is going on. Yet this is the same Peter who – having denied Christ three times, declares his love for the risen Lord, and is then called by Christ to follow him and take his message to the world. Here there is no sudden realisation of who or what God is, but a gradual dawning of the significance of what Peter has already see, and already heard.

Last week's Gospel, when we head of Thomas' doubting his fellow disciples account of Jesus' appearance with them, provides us with yet a different way to see God being made known. Here the questions of Thomas (as well as the doubts and fears of the other disciples) were answered in ways that met them where they were. Jesus appeared in a locked room to comfort those who hid for fear; and Thomas doubts were transformed by his encounter with the risen Christ.

So let us not be led astray by the compelling account of Paul's conversion – let us remember that God is known in so many ways; and can be known by each of us. We do not all need to encounter God in the same way that Paul did – or Peter – or Thomas – or the person sitting next to us. We are all called to encounter God in the way that he speaks to us – in the way that we find him in our lives. And then we can join together to celebrate our faith, our doubts, our certainties as we gather together in Christ's name, and share in his presence among and through us.