

### ET phone home. 16th May, 2021.

Some people are weird, some are distinctly strange, and some are just rather unusual. I wonder what we'd have thought of Jesus if we'd have met him.

In our gospel today he says that 'they are not of this world, just as I am not of this world,' referring to his disciples. That is a strange thing to say. We are not from Mars or Venus, although some men and women might like to think they were, nor are we from planet Zog - although some folk seem to behave as though they were. Personally, I prefer Outer Zog.

What we are being called to do here is to remain in this world, whilst at the same time not being a part of it.

This is a fairly tall order; be something you're not in a situation where to do so is against everything you've ever known or understood as 'normal' before.

That, of course, begs the question of what is 'normal'? There's an old saying by Robert Owen, a Welsh textile manufacturer, 'All the world old is queer save thee and me, and even thou art a little queer.' He lived in the middle of the 19th century when 'queer' still meant 'strange' or 'odd.'

So it would seem that Jesus is calling us out to be different in some way or another.

I don't think we have to be oddballs; indeed, I don't think most of us would be comfortable with being thought of as oddballs, nor would we want to be that way. There is no need to be afraid of being so different that you appear absurd like Black Adder trying to escape the First World War trenches by appearing to have gone mad, sticking pencils up his nose, wearing underpants on his head and muttering 'Wibble'.

But we are, I think, being asked to project a different attitude or approach to the traditional values of this world, such that people question us.

It is not an easy task to really put God top of your list of priorities every single day. We clutter up our diaries and calendars with appointments and meetings and so on, and I'm prepared to bet that not many - if any - of us actually timetable a 'time for God' or even 'time for me' into their weekly agenda.

No doubt there will be some that I have offended by saying that, and their day starts and possibly ends with prayer, but honestly and truly, do you take God or Jesus with you into every aspect of your day? I wish I could say I did - but it would be a lie. The fact that I wear this flea collar around my neck does not put me 6 feet above contradiction, as some

priests like to think it does. Nor does it give me any more access to the numinous or holiness of God than you have. What it does do is make me more likely to be criticized if I fall short of your expectations in any way.

But this isn't about me - it's about all of us on our journey with the risen Christ, in which maintaining contact on a minute by minute basis is needed. My buddy Martin Luther was quoted as saying, 'I am so busy now that if I do not spend three hours each day in prayer, I could not get through the day.'

Sir Jacob Astley, 1st Baron of Reading and a Royalist in the English Civil War against the Parliamentarians, reportedly prayed before

the Battle of Edgehill in October of 1642, "'O Lord, Thou knowest how busy I must be this day. If I forget Thee, do not thou forget me'" So let's not use our other commitments as an excuse or reason to sideline God in our day.

At some point, therefore, people may come up to us and question us; it may be a simple, easy question, like, 'Why do you go to church?' Or it may be something a little more confrontational, like, 'I heard you were one of those God-botherers - you don't believe all that crap, do you?'

Peter's first letter tells us to, 'Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who

asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.'

This, to me, tends to fill me with a gentle terror, as I fear I will in some way fail to answer appropriately or with enough conviction, and then be yet another disciple running from Jesus as when he was arrested in Gethsemane. So when I have that fear, I turn to the words of Jesus himself who told us in Luke's gospel, 12:12 'for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say.'

But there has to be something about us that draws people to ask us such a question in the first place. You might think it's easier for

ladies because all they have to do is wear a cross on a chain around their necks, and then someone could ask them if that meant anything to them.

I suppose we blokes could do the same, and, of course, those in monastic orders do, and bishops have their pectoral crosses. I have been at churches where the occasional man has had a thumping great pectoral cross on his chest, but he took it off the moment the service was over - so would never have been questioned on its significance to him.

Thus we need to lead people to Christ gently, not beating them over the head with pentecostal zeal and asking them if they have

'been saved', or threatening hellfire and damnation if they don't instantly get down on their knees and grovel in abject guilt and misery, while you stand over them with a look of pious and imperious triumph.

This is one of those occasions where the question we should be asking ourselves is, 'What would Jesus do here?'

No-one would deny that Jesus was a leader - but what sort of a leader? He was not a warrior, he was not a politician, he was not into self-aggrandizement in any way, and yet he drew people of all walks of life to him.

His was leadership by attraction, not promotion or coercion. He did not 'advertise' himself, but he was always available to people.

And more than that, he was consistently and reliably the same - all the time.

You and I know people who you can never be easy with, as you cannot tell from one day to the next which side of bed they got out of. One day they are your best buddy, and the next they cut you dead in the street. I had two bosses like that in my surgical career, and it was a nightmare to try and guess which one I was going to work with that day - Dr Jekyll or Mr Hyde.

So what I am saying here is 'WYSIWYG' - which stands for 'What you see is what you get'. The same yesterday, today and tomorrow - didn't someone else get described in the same way?

However, it's not easy, and to be truly trustworthy and reliable in any way requires courage, determination and consistency, particularly if our temper has a tendency to be mercurial.

This doesn't mean that we have to be numbingly dull and boringly the same, without changes of mood or flashes of brightness - we are not called to be a glum lot - but we need to guard against getting out of bed in a mood

that would have your dog growling at you. That sort of mood shift makes us untrustworthy, and also probably means that we are flying false colours; we are advertising a persona that isn't really true.

If my dog is suspicious of you - then so am I. Animals are frequently better judges of character than we humans are. But I'm preaching to the choir here - you all know that!

The last thing I want to emphasize to you is that we Christians cannot all be lumped into the same mould - we come in all different shapes, colours, sizes, and with different opinions, tastes in music, literature and art.

We also have different talents and personalities - we are not supposed to be a soft touch or easily taken for a ride; we are told, "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.' There are several different translations for the Greek words used here for 'shrewd' and 'innocent', but note that none of them is either 'deceitful' or 'sneaky' as snakes, or 'gullible' or 'dumb' as doves.

In conclusion then, we are being told here that we are not of this world, even though we have to live in it. That reinforces the promise that in Christ we are a 'new creation'. Sanctified -

that is, made holy - by the Holy Spirit of God. That's not something to be taken lightly, and it needs constant recharging by prayer and practice. One without the other is largely a waste of time, so let's see if we can make our actions match our words.

If we can't, then we need help. I hope you know by now where to find it.