

On the Way: Meeting the Unexpected



On life's journey we are continually confronted with the unexpected. It may be something small and insignificant, or a matter of some consequence, such as a shock medical diagnosis. For the little Jack Russell dog above, it was a goat!

As Christians we are always 'on the way'. At our baptism and confirmation we made a decision to follow Jesus who is for us, 'the way, and the truth and the life', John 14:6. Each day we have the opportunity to renew this decision as we offer, out of love, our bodies, minds and souls to God to be used for the service of others. This way of living gives meaning and purpose to our lives. But there are problems.

When we get up in the morning, we might have a plan for the day, even a little written list. By the evening when we review what actually happened, it is often quite different from what we had expected. Things we intended to do were not done, while we did other activities in response to unplanned events that faced us.

We Christians are pilgrims on a journey, whether we are going to school, working, shopping, cleaning the house, cooking, gardening, visiting

people, waiting for someone, playing sport, driving the car, or are confined to a hospital bed or nursing home. Every day, 24/7, we have opportunities and challenges to follow Jesus, participating in God's mission of showing God's love to others, being Christ in our world.

When we look at Jesus' ministry in the gospels, it often took place 'on the way', travelling from one place to another. We read: "he was setting out on a journey", "he approached the gate of the town", "when he entered Capernaum", "going up to Jerusalem", and so on.

In these in-between places Jesus frequently met something unexpected which demanded his love and compassion. It might have been something he saw, such as a widow in distress following those carrying the dead body of her only son, in Luke 7:12, or a man suddenly kneeling before him, asking what to do to inherit eternal life, in Mark 10:17. At one place, in Luke 8:41-56, Jesus had two situations to deal with, one on top of the other. First Jairus begged him to come and heal his only daughter, but as Jesus went, he was stopped by a sick woman who touched his clothing and drew healing from him. Even when about to have a quiet break in Matthew 14:13, Jesus unexpectedly had to change his plans because people met him needing healing.

We, too, can be challenged by others directly, or through things we notice. Disturbances to our lives can also come through a telephone call, a text message, an email, the 'snail mail' we retrieve from our letter box, someone we meet, a chance thought or a time of prayer. Often our first response to an unexpected interruption is to resent it and try to dismiss it quickly. Especially this is so when we are already engaged in what we judge as important work, or are about to have a time to relax. Can our second response see an interruption as an opportunity to show God's love to another in a little more costly way, giving people life rather than death? If this was the way Jesus travelled, it is surely the way for us who follow him. Perhaps such unexpected events have a purpose?

We are not in control of unexpected interruptions, which may allow God to more easily use them to guide us to care for one another, and through them to speak to us.

For example, when in a hurry, we might be stopped by someone we tried to avoid, who begins to tell us, yet again, their story. We are tempted to let our minds wander and our eyes glaze over, but if we listen carefully, we might hear something important. God can speak to us through unexpected people and in quite surprising circumstances.

Some years ago, when I was feeling rather 'down' because we had decided to move from Dondingalong, the plumber came to repair our toilet. I happened to be the one available to hold tools for him as he worked. We were having a casual conversation (as one does), when he suddenly said something that spoke directly to me and how I was feeling. It helped me, and I silently gave thanks to him and God for those few words.

But it is not just through words that God speaks, it can be through an unexpected exchange of a smile, seeing the beauty of a flower, a caring action, or an event that lifts us or challenges us. Every day opportunities arise, if we are open to notice them, revealing to us something of God's life-giving and compassionate love.

As Christians following the way of Jesus, may we daily zigzag our way through life with Christ and in the power of the Spirit, accepting the unexpected interruptions that amazingly can move us 'on the way' to God.

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