

FATIMA AND THE GREATER REALITY OF GOD
Sermon preached at 10.00am Sung Eucharist
St. Edmundsbury Cathedral
22 April 2018

In 1917, Europe was in turmoil. The First World War was raging. Revolutions were taking place in several countries including Portugal and Russia.

In 1917, Fatima was a remote, rural village in Portugal. Three children were minding sheep in a field when an angel appeared. The angel told the children the Virgin Mary would visit them with a message of hope and peace. For several months, on the same day each month, the Virgin Mary appeared to the children. By the time of the last appearance in October 1917 word had spread. 70,000 people gathered. Only the children saw Mary, but the crowd experienced the supernatural as the sun zigzagged across the sky and a wave of heat shone on them.

In due course the children's visions were judged to be genuine and now millions of people visit Fatima every year on pilgrimage. The field where the children were minding sheep in 1917 is now a huge public square, in fact an outdoor church where hundreds of thousands of people gather on holy days. At one end of the square there's a modern church that looks like a concrete spaceship. The Church of the Holy Trinity. Inside is an attractive auditorium with seating for 9000. All this is the centre of a modern town that exists to support the pilgrimage trade.

The Cathedral Choir visited Fatima during the Choir Tour in the week after Easter. We stayed in the Hotel San Jose – just down the road from Hotel Alleluia. I wished we were staying in a hotel with that kind of name. Some of us wondered what they call themselves in Lent.

Every day there are several services in the shrine churches. The choir sang in the modern church at the 11.00 Mass. It was an ordinary Saturday morning and we wondered how many people would come. May be a few hundred? The congregation gathered ... and gathered ... and gathered. The church was half full. Somewhere between 4000 and 5000 people! It was an amazing experience. The sermon in Portuguese was difficult to follow, but the choir sang beautifully and the priest thanked them warmly.

To be honest it's taken a while to digest the experience. Culturally, Fatima is very different to what I'm used to. That, of course, is why it was such a rich experience. 90% of the shops sell religious paraphernalia of one sort or another. Tat that I couldn't bring myself to buy - even as a joke for the Acting Dean or the Precentor. The account of the children's visions claims that the Angel that first appeared to them showed them a chalice and a pattern. "Come on" my Western, scientific-educated mind thought.

But now my spiritual, intuitive side has had a chance to catch up. The Bible is full of stories of God appearing to humble, ordinary people in insignificant places. Mary herself was an ordinary girl in a small, remote town when the Angel turned up to tell her she would become pregnant with God's child. The first people to experience the resurrection on Easter morning were ordinary women, and then humble fishermen. 1917, with Europe in turmoil, was a good time for a message of peace and hope from God.

When people experience the transcendent it makes sense that they experience that through their own religious language and culture. The angel with the chalice and paten fits. The children seeing the Virgin Mary makes sense in Catholic culture. When we experience the divine, which is other and inexpressible, chances are that will be mediated through symbols that we are used to.

Visiting Fatima in the week after Easter was a great blessing. It reminded me how the resurrection shows us we are part of a much greater reality. The disciples were in despair, feeling that Jesus' death was the end. But the life of God is above and beyond and greater than death. The reality of God is unimaginably greater than our short lives on this earth. Did you see the beautiful new moon this week? Just as the Universe is unimaginably vast and this planet is a speck in the vastness. Experiencing another culture reminds us that we are part of a much greater reality. Experiencing another religious culture, like Fatima or like Santiago in Spain, or places of pilgrimage in India or Asia. We are part of a bigger picture.

In our culture we have lost our sense of the Other, our awareness of a greater reality. In our culture, each person, each of us is led to belief that I am the centre looking at the world around me. I am the subject and other people, the world around are the objects in my life. My sense of myself starts with me – rather than a part of the greater reality of God. God has become an object that we consider. God has become an idea we may or may not choose to agree with. This is a serious mistake. In fact God is the subject and we are the objects of God's attention. God is the creator and we are the creatures. We should be overwhelmed by God's immensity rather than talking about God as if we can see God directly in front of us. ¹

It's a nice link between the three children of Fatima looking after sheep and the Good Shepherd in today's Gospel reading. More significantly, notice it's the Good Shepherd that does the calling and the sheep that do the responding. Whether we like the comparison with dull-witted sheep or not (it grates with me), the metaphor gets the relationship right: God calls us, we respond to God's voice – not the other way round.

You may know the story of Sara Miles. It's a dramatic story of conversion that reminds us that God is the mover. Sara Miles was raised an atheist and lived an enthusiastically secular life as a restaurant cook and writer in San Francisco. She was an intellectual, left-wing journalist with a habit for scepticism, at best indifferent to religion.

Then early one morning, for no earthly reason, aged forty six, she wandered into a church. She felt compelled to take Communion – for the first time in her life. At that moment she became a Christian. She ate a piece of bread, took a sip of wine, and found herself radically transformed. Sara realised what she'd been doing with her life all along was what she was meant to do: feed people. She started a food pantry at the church. That was the year 2000. Now the food pantry at St Gregory's provides free groceries to over 400 families a week. Other food pantries have opened around the city, all run by volunteers.

In her book *Take This Bread*, Sara has written that her's is a "story of an unexpected and terribly inconvenient Christian conversion, told by a very unlikely convert". She was not the person her reporter colleagues or family ever expected to belong to a church let alone preach the Word of God.

Its an amazing story. Notice the key dynamic. Sara Miles felt compelled to walk into a church a take Communion. But it wasn't her doing. God was calling to her. She responded to God's call and discovered she is part of a reality much greater than she had previously imagined.

Canon Matthew Vernon
Canon Pastor & Sub Dean

¹ see *Both Alike To Thee* by Mervyn Matthews p. 31