

Dear All,

A couple of years ago my New Year's resolution was to read John Bunyan's book "The Pilgrims Progress". I think I got about a third of the way through before giving up, which was still notably better than the year I joined a gym.....

Anyway, last Lent I discovered a lovely little book called "To be a Pilgrim – 40 Days with The Pilgrims Progress". With the help of that book, I was finally able to digest the story which portrays Christian encountering a wealth of characters who help him to discover what it means to be a on a journey of faith.

Move on a few more months to the Christmas season (which carries on through January until the festival of Candlemas on 2nd February), and the theme of encounters shaping our faith is evident once again.

Early in the Christmas narratives we read about Mary's visitation to Elizabeth, in which Elizabeth instantly recognises she has had an encounter with the mother of her Lord; "why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Luke 1:43). In this moment of encounter the two women are united in trust, hope, anticipation (and probably fear) as they recognise that the sons they carry are destined to change the world.

The shepherds have encounters too, firstly with an angel of the Lord and then with Jesus himself. These encounters are so significant that the unlikely shepherds feel compelled to "spread the word concerning what has been told them about this child" (Luke 2:17). Rather than dismissing their unusual testimony, as one might expect, we are told that everyone who heard their declaration was 'amazed' by it. Similarly, the wise men have an encounter with Jesus, comprehend that they have witnessed the promised Messiah and feel called to "bow down and worship him" (Matthew 2:11).

Finally, in the Candlemas reading from Luke's Gospel, Simeon and Anna have an encounter with Jesus as his parents present him in the temple. They have been preparing for this encounter their whole lives, and as such their eyes are fully open and they recognise who Jesus is instantly "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation" (Luke 2:29-30).

Our own encounters with God - be that through people we cross paths with, through our time in prayer and devotion, through moments enjoying the beauty of creation or through gathered worship – are hugely important. They shape and strengthen our personal journeys of faith as we move through life. As a church community we are privileged to know Jesus already, but that doesn't mean we can forego a lifetime of learning about him more and more deeply. Like Elizabeth, the shepherds, the wise men, Anna and Simeon we need to have eyes and hearts that are open to encounter, so that we recognise Jesus in our daily lives and get to know him more and more. And when we encounter Jesus, we will feel more compelled to spread the word concerning him and to bow down and worship him – one flows from the other.

This New Year, don't worry too much about making resolutions that are really hard to keep. Instead, why not decide to be more open to encounter? Seek to recognise God at work in your day to day life, take time to reflect on encounters that you have had and think more intentionally about where you have noticed God to be present.

I doubt that Elizabeth, the shepherds, the wise men, Anna or Simeon ever joined a gym (I am in good company then)! But they did become some of the first people in history to have encounters with Jesus that would change the course of their lives. What about you? How will your encounters with Jesus during 2022 shape your future? With eyes and hearts that are open to encounter, this year could hold more than you imagine, this could be the year that your relationship with Jesus grows even deeper.

I wish you a very happy and blessed 2022, and I pray that you will have eyes to see, ears to hear and hearts full of expectancy, hope and wonder.

Every blessing,

Laura