

Our Lent programme this year is all about ‘Encounters’: where do we meet God? There are sessions on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, and details in the bulletin sheet. But there are many people who can’t get to those elements of the Lent programme. This isn’t a criticism. I know how genuinely busy people are, and I can’t get to most of the other elements either. So we are having a series of Sunday sermons on ‘Encounters in liturgy’: how, when (and whether) you might meet God while you are in the service at church.

We don’t want you to feel that if you don’t experience mystic rapture every Sunday morning you aren’t doing it right. We are all different, and regular, faithful attendance is a valuable discipline in itself. Nor do we want you to think that the Sunday service is your only opportunity to meet God, but if that is the time and place when it is easiest for you to be open to God, it makes sense to consider the possibilities. My piece of the puzzle is to look at our entrances and exits – our comings-in and goings-out (or, from the other side of the door, our going in and coming out).

Let’s start even before you arrive, because what might happen while you are here can be strongly influenced by what is going on in your life ‘outside’. Why are you coming at all? There will be as many answers to that question as there are people here; the ones you’d probably give Fr David or me if we asked, and the other ones: it’s what I always do on Sunday; I like the coffee, cake and chat afterwards; my other half (or parent) expected me to come or dragged me here; it’s the only chance I get to be away from the family/the noise/my other responsibilities. What sort of week or morning have you had? Frantic, pleasant, infuriating, rushed? Are you tired, happy, relaxed, angry, apprehensive, bored, late? Are you hoping I don’t go on too long because you’ve got to take the kids to football or the family to Grandma or put the joint in the oven?

All of this is natural, honest and reasonable, and human and realistic. Amazingly, God knows about all of it, and he can find his way through, if we give him a fair chance. We’re sometimes told that when we come into church we should leave all that ‘stuff’ at the door. I’m not convinced. Your ‘stuff’ is part of who you are, and God wants to meet you as you are, not as you think you ought to be. He actually loves today’s you, with all its assorted stress, worries and imperfections. In the old Holy Communion service there are the ‘Comfortable Words’, one of which says: ‘Come unto me, all who labour and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest’. The verse goes on: ‘Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.’

I have been told: ‘I don’t want to come to church and hear you preaching and praying about work. I come to church to get away from work.’ Well – yes and no. Church probably takes an hour or so a week. Work – by which I mean whatever else we do, which includes parenting, caring, housework, volunteering, learning, and even navigating through a week of lonely days – takes up a far larger proportion of time. If we think that God isn’t there, isn’t concerned with what we spend most of our waking hours doing, only notices when we are in church, we are not only making a big mistake, but are drastically limiting our opportunities to encounter him. It’s much better to bring the work and the worries with you, sit or kneel down when you come in and say: ‘OK God, this is me for this week – over to you.’

What you bring into church with you is important. But the atmosphere of the church is also important. When I was young and went to church people were handed a book (if they had forgotten their own), went to a seat, knelt down and prayed (or looked as if they did). Then they might glance around to see who was there. The organ played quietly to cover the sounds of

people arriving and getting settled. But there was no chatter and no wandering about, and there were fearsome elderly ladies in hats who glared at you. (Lord: save me from becoming a fearsome elderly lady.) Some churches have a wonderful feeling of being prayed in, that the people who use them care for each other as well as for the building, that you are welcomed and valued whoever you are, and that God is undoubtedly lurking somewhere nearby. Other churches feel cold and unloved, as if even when they are empty there is a fearsome lady in a hat just waiting to glare at you, and when they are full they are stiff, formal and alarming.

So you come into church with your stuff, the church surrounds you with its atmosphere, and how do you begin?

The opening words of Morning Prayer, the ancient service of Matins, are: 'O Lord, open our lips, and our mouths shall proclaim your praise.' Psalm 100 says it well: 'Go your way into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise.' Start with gratitude: thank you for a safe journey, for the bus that came, thank you for getting me through another week, thank you that I actually made it this morning, despite everything. You are a great God (or, as one child put it, 'You're great, God!'). Let us bless the Lord. And then: 'Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open...', and your heart opens to whatever may come.

Some time later, we leave. The liturgy ends: 'Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.' Maybe we go straight away. Maybe we stay for the coffee, cake and conversation. Maybe we sang some good hymns and 'that was a nice service, vicar'. Maybe the worries and pressure come back as we walk out of the door. But we go in peace, and everything we go to is our service to God. Maybe we haven't had the relief or the inspiration we prayed for, but God answers prayer in his time and in his way not ours.

We are sent out, dismissed, we don't just trickle quietly away. Just as soldiers come together on the parade ground to march, drill and train together as a body, and are then dismissed to their individual tasks, so we have come to worship, pray and praise together and are now sent off to our own pursuits. The soldiers are still soldiers, and we are still God's people, part of his kingdom and part of his plan. His plan is that we go out into the world to love and serve him, and he goes with us. We don't leave him in church – but we may have to concentrate a bit harder to realise that he's with us out there too. As a worker-priest friend of mine says: 'God in the mass on Sunday; God in the mess on Monday.'