

Reading: Acts 9:1-18

A few years ago I had the privilege of going on holiday to Rome, and visiting a number of the incredible sites: the Colosseum, the Roman Forum, and of course the Vatican. I don't know how many of you have been to the Vatican, but if you have you'll know that it is extremely busy. It is beautiful and stunning; however I found it hard to properly take it all in, as you were constantly being ushered along with thousands of others.

However, the scene could not have been more different at the place which was ultimately my favourite from the whole trip: the Church of St. Paul Outside the Walls. This doesn't feature in many tourist guides, and was in quite a run-down part of the city. But here, in this church, lies the tomb of St. Paul.

It was so quiet there. No queues, no admission fee, no tourists (well, apart from me). And in the heart of the church lay the tomb, above which you can see the chains which, tradition holds, bound St. Paul whilst he was in prison.

I knelt there, next to the tomb and beneath the chains, and felt the Lord say in the quiet: "to follow me is more than just going to church on Sunday, and leaving feeling good. It is a daily walk involving your whole life – 'take up your cross daily, and follow me.' And, through this, the world is changed. Through my people quietly being transformed, and then transforming their communities."

I really felt that strongly in that church. The most personally transformative place on that trip was not the stunning, overwhelming majesty and glamour of the Vatican, surrounded by the hustle and bustle of thousands of people; but alone, in that quiet church, in a graffiti-ridden rundown Roman suburb.

I find that a helpful metaphor for our discipleship journeys walking with Jesus. Every one of us – whether that be Saints Paul and Peter; Ann and myself; or my Jacob – are disciples, apprentices of Jesus. Always learning as we walk with Him.

And as we are transformed slowly to become more like Him, He will partner with us to bless and transform His world. When we pray "thy Kingdom come, thy will be done," we are praying for Him to work through us to make this world more like the one that He wants it to be.

This is rarely, in my experience, glamorous. It happens in the quiet; the quiet of waking up on a dreary and grey January morning and trying to read our Bibles over a cup of tea, asking God to highlight which verses He wants for us today.

This is the essence of the BREAD journals that we've been mentioning over the past few weeks: allowing God to speak to us through His Word; nudging us quietly to where He is working, and is inviting us to join in. If you are wondering about getting one, can I please urge you to do so and give it a go. That's how I started this time last year – admittedly, somewhat reluctantly – and it transformed my relationship with Jesus; and subsequently my relationship with others.

An example of this was a few months ago, when the BREAD reading was Mark 10: Jesus blessing little children. Jesus is angered by His disciples trying to prevent the children from coming to Him, and in the Message translation says: "Don't ever get between these children and me! Unless you accept God's Kingdom in the simplicity of a child, you'll never get in."

When I prayed into these verses, I felt God say two things. Firstly, that little children are just as much disciples of Jesus as I am. How they encounter Him will look simpler to how I do, but is no less valid. And secondly, the simplicity of their approach is something that I can learn from.

As a result of this BREAD reflection, we started the Baby & Toddler Group - a wonderful way to get to know and bless parents in our area, and also to explore simple ways to encounter the love of God. Cups of tea and chats, sharing together the delights and challenges of parenting; very simple songs and prayers; and the joy of play. It really is a ray of light in my week, when it feels like there's a little glimpse of Thy Kingdom come. And all from God speaking to me through a simple 10 minute reflection on a Bible passage one morning.

I'm going to finish by highlighting another example of this from today's passage. Obviously Saul's dramatic conversion is incredible, and ultimately goes on to change the Church and the world.

However, there's a good chance that none of this would have happened, if a disciple in Damascus had not been praying quietly alone. Ananias is never mentioned again in the Bible, but his quiet obedience is crucial in helping to kick-start the greatest missionary in the history of the Church.

All of us, like Ananias, have crucial roles to play for Jesus and His Kingdom. And they all start with quiet prayer, Bible reading, journaling and reflecting etc - opening ourselves to Jesus transforming us, and then through us transform His world. Amen.