

# St Simon Zelotes



14 April 2018

Dear Friends,

A final update as our sabbatical draws to a close.

I have been spending some time while in the Lake District reading a few books which describe and analyse the 'secular age' we have entered into, in the West, since the revolution of the 1960s (described in one book as 'the decade we never left'). A revolution which has its roots -one of the books I have been reading argues - way back in the 1500s.

This 'secular age' is one in which large numbers of people in the West find it possible to live in the world without God or any belief in the supernatural. Whereas in the medieval era, not to believe in God was pretty unthinkable now, to believe in Him seems unthinkable, certainly to the cultural and intellectual elite and to a large percentage of the rest of the population.

The secular 'story' is that this change has come about because now we have science and reason which make God and the supernatural unnecessary; now we can account for the mysteries of the Universe using the telescope and computer rather than by revelation from God. I have found it helpful and illuminating to see that this 'secular story', of a humanity come of age, is itself a belief system, for science and reason enrich our lives by telling us about the 'how' but they cannot tell us about the 'why'.

So widespread and powerful is the secular story, endorsed in a thousand ways day by day in the media, that it is hard to step apart from the crowd and cut a lonely furrow of trust in a God who made us and loved us. And yet there are those in this secular world who are haunted by the loss of God; for example, the novelist Julian Barnes who said 'I don't believe in God but I miss Him'. Christians, and especially preachers, need to speak in to this belief system, sensitive to the pressure on people to believe in a world without God, but confident in the message of Christ's life, death and resurrection as the powerful instrument to change minds and hearts as much today as it ever has been. Christendom is over but not Christ!

It was a novel experience, for the first time in over 30 years, not to be taking Easter services. I missed our St Simon's Good Friday hour at the cross and celebrating the glorious resurrection with all of you on Easter Day. On Good Friday, as a family, we read the whole of Matthew's Passion Narrative with short pauses for reflection. I found that there was something about reading the whole of this true story in one go, which was powerful and moving. One of the things that struck me afresh is the sense that this narrative is recording events which really did happen in history. The account just doesn't read as some kind of made up myth or legend. I am so grateful to have the actual historical events of the Lord's death and resurrection on which to base my faith.

Most of the family joined Liz and me for the final week of our Lake District stay. Harry was pressing for ever longer walks. Monday to Wednesday were mostly wet but Thursday 5 April dawned as a wonderful walking day. It had snowed overnight so that the hills stood white against a perfectly clear blue morning sky, a scene of stunning beauty. We set off on a walk of 15 miles with 5500 feet of ascent taking 9.5 hours. For the first half we were wading through snow then slithering down the alarmingly steep, rocky and in places icy west face of Great Gable. For me it was perhaps a little over ambitious and I think I am still recovering!

I have spent the last four days (10-13 April) at a Retreat house near Billingshurst which I've been visiting since the mid 1980s. When I first came it was called 'St Julian's' and was run by a small community of Anglican women. A few years ago it was passed on to the Roman Catholic Diocese of Arundel and Brighton who continued to run the house with the same vision and ethos. It was a sadness to receive an e mail a couple of weeks ago saying that the house will be closing this summer.

Originally a medieval house it was extensively restored in the Edwardian era and has the feel of a comfortable English country house. It has extensive gardens with a small lake. It is beautifully quiet (you can eat meals in silence) with very limited phone signal and internet. Along with many others I have found it a place, over the years, where I can draw aside and hear from God in the pages of scripture and connect with Him in prayer in a way that just is not possible in the pressure and bustle of everyday life.

I have been reading and meditating from Scripture around the theme of 'boldness and confidence'. I have thought about the source of Joshua's confidence; how in Psalm 27 David reflects on overcoming his fear in the face of opposition; and how the gospel of Matthew describes the Lord Jesus dealing with conflict with quiet courage. Above all I have been reminded that Christian boldness comes out of knowing who God is and 'gazing on his beauty', as David puts it.

Now all that remains of our Sabbatical weeks is a walk from Siena to Rome. Liz and I travel to Geneva on Tuesday to catch up with some friends from our previous church who have been through a tough time recently. Then we travel on to Siena via Florence to begin the walk to Rome. We won't be taking the (dare I say) easy option of having our luggage transported for us. Instead, we will carry all that we need on our backs, which means that we must ruthlessly discard anything superfluous and travel light. Both of us have found that the simplicity of living with just a few things, the steady rhythm of walking, punctuated by times of reading and prayer, is spiritually refreshing and helps us to re-centre on the Lord.

As I think about what I have learned during this Sabbatical I am struck that it is not so much new things as re-learning some old and fundamental truths in a fresh way. I think I understand what TS Eliot meant in those wonderful lines from The Four Quartets

"We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time."

We look forward to being back with you in a couple of weeks.

With love and prayers,

Mike