



St Marylebone
Parish Church

**3rd Sunday of Epiphany 2022,
11.00am Hinde Street Methodist Church**

Expectations are funny things. I find they almost run my life. If I'm expecting a day off or a celebration, or something as simple as a meal or a film to be good, and its *good*, but not *as good* as (I consciously or not) expected it to be, then I can be a real pain in the what's-it.

Today's readings, amongst other things that they raise, raise questions of expectation and identity, but we'll come back to that.

The Roman Catholic priest-writer Anthony DeMello drew heavily on his mixed Indian and American heritage. He got into trouble with the Church of his day (he died in 1987) for drawing a little too heavily on the eastern philosophies of his heritage; they had, of course, become very fashionable here in the West in their own right in the second half of the twentieth century. In his book 'Awareness', drawing on sound Ignatian teaching (he was a Jesuit himself), he suggests that expectations are the downfall of almost everything. Our work and lives and relationships are so often tough, because (whether we recognise it or not) we have expectations of how they 'should' be.

The people we love hurt us because we have expectations of what love is, how it works. It goes, he says, for work/life/everything. As a priest in the Church of England I'm always having conversations with people who tell me that they *would* believe in God if the world would only run like 'this' or 'that', or how is it that things are 'x' or 'y'? Fr Anthony DeMello, in the footsteps of the great founder of the Jesuits St Ignatius of Loyola, wants to get us to a place of holy 'indifference'. Not *uncaring*; but of being free from the need for anything except the reality of God. Free from the need for the world, ourselves, each other to be a certain way and constantly hurt that they aren't. Expectations.

It's important to say, that this is not a simplistic idea, it is a great theological gift. So please don't take against my very superficial sketch this morning – what I'm talking about is not cruel or puritanical or capricious (which, I understand, it *could* very easily be twisted to become). It *is* about 'the glorious liberty of the children of God' (Romans 8.21), discovered through an identity found in Christ, and not invested elsewhere in things that will only let us down.

So to today's readings. Expectations and identity.

The hand of which St Paul writes does not seek to be an eye. It does not expect to be able to see, and get cross when it can't. Just as the eye does not resent the hand, or wish it could pick things up. That isn't because the eye is charitable, or the hand grew up a 'good Methodist', it is because it would be ridiculous for them to expect to be otherwise or resent each other, when they belong to the same body, they are *one*.

Their expectations do not trip them up (the eye had obviously been reading Anthony DeMello's book awareness), because their identity is true, and whole.

So to the Gospel. Expectations and identity.

Jesus stands up in the Synagogue today and says those extraordinary words, fulfilling the Prophecy of Isaiah.

It's always quite something when people stand up in church and say something. 'I have an objection' when in the marriage service the minister says 'does anyone know any just cause or impediment why these two may not be lawfully wed'. Quite a moment. Has anyone ever been to a wedding where that has happened? I still love that moment in the Vicar of Dibley when it happens, the incomer claiming to be the mistress and mother of the groom-to-be's child, only to say 'oops, sorry, wrong church' when he turns round horrified.

In the C of E monastery where I trained for the priesthood, a place called the Community and College of the Resurrection at Mirfield in West Yorkshire, one of the elderly monks (50 years or more into religious life) suffering with fairly advanced dementia by this time, famously said, in the silence and almost complete darkness of the monastic church before night prayer (Compline) one night, 'can anyone tell me the rules of this game?'. A truer and more beautiful moment of pertinent confusion can scarcely be imagined.

Anyway, when people stand up and say something in church, it's a 'thing'. And it was a *thing* when Jesus stood up, read, and declared today. But why was it a 'thing'? Expectation and identity.

Because the ordinary Synagogue goers and the scribes and pharisees did not expect it. There was a heavy cloud of expectation of the Messiah in those few hundred years around Jesus. Proto-messiahs were popping up all over the place, relatively speaking, scholars tell us. So it's not that no Messiah was expected, but *this* man, Jesus of Nazareth? Surely not. His identity was the Messiah, the anointed of God, God Himself come amongst us, creator made creature. And this was wholly unexpected. And I don't mean 'oh what a pleasant surprise, there's more sherry than I thought in this trifle', unexpected. This is the kind of expectation that explodes people's religious understanding and relationships, that undoes centuries of living and thinking, that ultimately can only end in hatred and death. Expectations and identity are powerful, we musn't underestimate their power. After all, they put the King of love to death by crucifixion.

So we too, must allow Jesus to confound our expectations as only He can, as we also allow Him to give us our true identity, as only He can. If we are clinging to expectations and identities that we have made or inherited from elsewhere (as we surely all are, all the time) then they will only deal death - little death, socially acceptable and even convenient forms of death, as well as other, larger realities of death.

Now, let's transpose this on to our own lives. What does this image of expectation and identity found in today's readings and the Ignatian Spiritual treasure of holy indifference point us to there? Onto the life you and I live amongst colleagues and loved ones and friends, neighbours and strangers. Take a moment. Let God reveal some gift.

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Now let's transpose these images onto our church - here at Hinde Street, here in Marylebone, and the worldwide Church of Jesus Christ - One, Holy, Catholic (that is to say, universal). What does it mean for us all? Take a moment.

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What are our expectations as we get out of bed each morning? What is our identity as we go about our daily lives?

What were your expectations as you walked into church today? What is your identity as you leave through those doors each week, or log off this video stream?

The prophecy has been fulfilled, IS being fulfilled in our hearing today, now. Christ is here, among us, as we are 'gathered together' virtually and in person 'two or three' and more.

We meet God here. Nothing less, and there is nothing more in heaven or on earth. We meet God, in the movement of the Holy Spirit now, in the hearing of Scripture, and as a 'C of E boy' I look most of all to that great and timeless gift on the night of Christ's Passion, of His life given to us, His presence *really* with us, hidden in the Bread and Wine of Holy Communion, just as the great and holy founders of your own Methodist tradition did.

In silent prayer, in meditation, in a methodological commitment to be people *living deeply*. In these deep mines, we discover great riches - gifts from God of our identity. And we can and should expect them, because God is alive and active and full of love amongst His people.

Good expectations, notice, but freed by St Ignatius and Anthony DeMello to have the expectation of love and God's presence everywhere, because we have traded-in and abandoned the expectations we so often come to life with, of ourselves and others and God, for something some how much, much less and much, much more.

We Christians (because of who God is, and what God has done, and who God has made us by baptism - which is always the bedrock of our identity), we are inspired and liberated to think of expectation and identity differently, and live the realities of expectation and identity differently.

To be free of the heavy chains (however attractive they may appear at first, and whatever half-truths we may tell ourselves), to be free of worldly identities and expectations, and begin discovering the real thing. All that today's readings point us to. Who God is, who we are; and what we can expect in this life, and what follows.