

Reflection for Sunday 28 March

I have many photographs, mostly on CD covers, of the late, great conductor Sir John Barbirolli. Some are formal portraits, most of the rest show him at work, sometimes resplendent in the archaically silly garb of white tie and tails, but less formally too in rehearsal or poring over a score, deep in study. My father saw another side of him. As a young student in Manchester, his room looked across to Barbirolli's flat, where he could be spied in the morning, in his braces, cooking his breakfast.

Why do I tell you all this? It's because of that little, so often overlooked verse at the end of today's otherwise all-so-familiar account of Jesus's triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Here it is again: 'Then he entered Jerusalem and went to the temple; and when he had looked around at everything' (and here's the bit that really grabbed my attention), 'as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.'

It's a wonderful and, I think, utterly authentic moment that Mark simply wouldn't have made up to embellish the story. The big moment has passed – and what do you do? Go back to your friends' house for a quiet night. Or to return to John Barbirolli's braces for a moment, it's a reminder that life isn't all about the big moments and intense experiences. Sometimes we have to do the ordinary things, like cooking our breakfast or just taking a bit of time out.

I think this quiet moment, so easily passed over in our eagerness to discover what Jesus did next, is such an important part of the whole story, and it's wonderful that Mark thinks so too, unlike Matthew and Luke, who when they wrote their 'improved' versions of the climax of Jesus's life, cut it out in their keenness to get on with the action.

The point of the story has resonances, perhaps, with one of the lessons from the mysterious story of Jesus's transfiguration on the mountain top, when his face shone, Moses and Elijah appeared and God's presence seemed so powerfully present. Peter wanted to build shelters to keep Jesus and those great stars of the Old Testament talking together longer. He didn't want the experience to end. He, James and John had to come down and get on with ordinary life – just as we do. But in our story ordinariness is embraced by Jesus, and all the more remarkable in the context of what was to happen next.

As I've reflected on this, three truths have come into my mind. These are, the need for us all to take time out and not be ashamed of doing so; the need for quiet moments that help to put our bigger plans into perspective and the need for patience. All these things should help give meaning for our lives individually, but also for our lives together, and not least in the church.

Maybe this year is not the time to go on too much about quiet moments. Some of us have had too many of them. For some it's been far more than quiet - a year of deep loneliness. But I think that one of the unexpected and welcome lessons of the last year is that, extremes apart, the opportunity to stand back for a while, look, think and pray has been utterly invaluable?

I have found in the past that Christian ministry can become so busy that I've often failed to see the wood for trees. I've not been able to discern the situations that really demand attention. Busy-ness leads to thoughtlessness – and that won't do. Jesus resists the temptation to launch straight into cleansing the temple after he's first been to take stock of what's going on there. If stopping to think is right for him, it surely gives us permission to pause before we act too?

This leads onto the second learning which is that we all need a balance between work and play, between me-time and you-time, between action and reflection – and prayer.

Despite the lack of normality this year, so many people have become tired, and others are exhausted. We've been captive at home, but with neither proper time off, nor the ability to do some of the things we need to address. I hope that, one good by-product of this frustration is that we've been able to see those needs in a new light and to see the importance of making time for them all in balance.

Patience may be a virtue and even, says St Paul, a fruit of the Spirit, but it seldom comes easily. I'm picking up here again, of course, on the implication of Jesus's decision not to launch into his cleansing of the temple until the time was right. But more than that, patience is not just about delaying an action until the right time, it's also about accepting that much of the time, we have to learn to live gently, without the need to expect everything we do to be wonderful or exciting.

You might think that the church is all too good at this and bit more drive wouldn't come amiss, but these three learnings are linked and patience must go together with discernment as well as with the acceptance that life has its dull moments and its times of tedium and of frustration. And we've got to learn both to live with that and to remember that they don't mean God has given up on us. Our story today reminds us that the very opposite is true.

Ordinary moments, whenever they happen, aren't given to us because we've failed to see the bigger picture – they're an important part of that bigger picture and of the life we share. At the start of Holy Week, when in the church's life everything comes thick, fast and furious, this is a truth we all need to take to heart now – and then again on 21 June, if indeed we'll be given permission then to get on with life again in a different and all too dangerously familiar way.