



The God Who Passes By

By Pete Greig

"Shortly before dawn he went out to them, walking on the lake.

He was about to pass by..."

Mark 6:48

The Renovaré Book Club affords an exciting opportunity for fellowship and formation. Fellowship with other readers but also fellowship with the Lord. Formation of our minds into new ways of thinking but also of ourselves into the likeness of Christ. And as we begin thinking about *How to Pray* - asking with the first disciples 'Lord, teach us to pray' - we are embarking upon a journey that is particularly focused upon the deepening of our fellowship with Christ and our resemblance of his character.

Right at the start, therefore, we need to think about the nature of Christ's relational invitation to each one of us in prayer. How is he likely to approach us in this process? How does he speak? What should we expect and how might we prepare to respond?

One of the greatest discoveries of my life - one that has quietly revolutionised my relationship with the Lord - is that the Creator of the universe whispers. I used to expect him to show up in style. To kick down the door of my life in hobnail boots. To speak in a booming voice. A little dry ice. Tricks of the light. That sort of thing.

Perhaps you remember the story of Jesus walking on the water? "Shortly before dawn he went out to them, walking on the lake." Boom! This is precisely the kind of thing I expected him to do. It's the CGI Jesus. The Marvel movie messiah. But then Jesus nears the boat and we are told the strangest thing: "he was about to pass by them."

Having gone to all the effort of walking on water halfway across an inland sea on a stormy night Jesus feigns disinterest. I imagine him giving a little casual wave to the boat as if he regularly takes hikes across the lake at night. As if he has somewhere else to go.

And then there's the time Jesus gate-crashes a conversation between two commuters on the road to Emmaus: "As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going further."

Having risen from the dead we can be fairly sure that Jesus has all the time in the world. You might say that his schedule is wide open. And the couple with whom he's been walking haven't yet clocked his identity. So why does he "continue on as if he were going further"? Why does he make out he's got somewhere else he needs to be?

There's something playful here. Something smiling and unassuming about the King of Kings. (How many others met the resurrected Jesus but failed to invite him in?)

We see something similar in Elijah's epiphany of 1 Kings 19. The prophet has been told to 'Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' And sure enough, "A great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake."

And then God speaks in that still, small voice. We expect him to thunder, to dazzle from the limelight, but instead he sidles up in the twilight to whisper in our ears.

As we travel together through the chapters of *How to Pray*, I hope you have extraordinary encounters with God along the way. But it's perfectly possible, and frankly far more likely, that you will have a series of quite ordinary encounters with God instead, but these will be no less profound.

These three stories – Jesus walking on the water towards the boat, Jesus joining the two people on the road to Emmaus, and God whispering to Elijah in the storm – are all intimate. The Lord actively approaches each person in a very lovely way. There is no sense that he is withdrawn, sullen or distant. Instead God is intrinsically and intentionally relational. He is the God who draws near. The One who initiates friendship again and again.

But, of course, each of these three stories also reveals that the God who comes close, also passes by. He is easy to miss. He approaches us, as Richard Rohr says, 'disguised as our lives'. And so, my prayer is that you will have eyes to see him in all his playful subtlety, and ears to hear his gentle whisper in spite of all the noise at this extraordinarily volatile time.

The characters in all three stories were in some kind of crisis – practical, psychological or theological. It is often when we are in turmoil that Jesus comes close. As C.S. Lewis says, 'God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our consciences, but shouts in our pains. It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.'

Jesus seeks us out - deliberately and intimately - in our distress. He joins us gently on the Emmaus road when we are struggling to navigate God's will. He walks upon the water looking like a ghost while we are straining at the oar, pulling against the wind in the small hours of the night. He is the figment of our own imagination. The familiar hope clothed in ambiguity.

I have no doubt that you may be embarking upon this journey in difficult times. Perhaps you are struggling with fearful circumstances or practical challenges like the disciples in the storm. Maybe you are wrestling with theological questions and disappointments like the couple on the Emmaus road. Or you might be processing psychological pain and doubts about your purpose like Elijah. Whatever your context, let me assure you that Immanuel comes near to us in such seasons with all his heart.

Only one of the people in these three stories was alone when they met the Lord. We tend to assume that encountering God is a solitary experience, but the disciples were all together in

a boat. The couple on the road to Emmaus were walking and talking in public, they included a stranger in their conversation and ultimately invited him into their home. The Renovaré Book Club places us in the same boat and on the same road in order to meet Jesus. Perhaps there is something about our togetherness in this process - the discussion groups, the shared journey, the opportunities to interact - that actually attracts the Lord.

And if you glimpse Jesus in the storm or sense his presence on the road over the next few weeks, don't be surprised if he feigns a certain detachment. If he pretends to pass you by, don't be deceived. He is waiting for you to want him, asking for you to ask him, insisting that you must 'urge him strongly' into your thoughts, your relationships and your home.

Response:

Sitting comfortably invite the Lord to come close as I study this book.

- Placing my hands open on my lap I pray, '*Come Holy Spirit.*'
- Placing my hands on my ears I pray, '*Give me ears to hear you.*'
- Placing my hands upon my eyes I pray, '*Give me eyes to see you.*'
- Placing my hands on my heart I pray again, '*Come Holy Spirit.*'