

In my view

Return from the edge

Simon Foulkes left his life as a vicar to drive a train on the Romney Hythe and Dymchurch Railway. He is back from exile now and, more relaxed, more realistic. 'God is closer', he says . . .

In 2005 I decided I'd had enough of vicaring. I'd done it for 16 years, I had a lot of negative stuff about the C of E to deal with, and a positive call to return to a strange and precious place. The experience of exile in secular employment on the Romney Marshes is bearing all sorts of fruit as I'm now twelve months back into full-time paid ministry.

Landscape matters to the English imagination. Our great poets took their part of the natural world and made it a landscape of emotion and psyche. Kipling wrote of the Romney Marshes 'Oh Romney Levels and Brenzett reeds, / I reckon you know what my mind needs'. Turner and Constable, Vaughan Williams and Elgar – their landscape-led hues and sounds imprint the mind with beauty and express our connection with what we see around us. In urban fashion, Lowry did the same.

So I engaged with the landscape of the Marsh imaginatively. Being drained land, it is all artificial – someone once looked at the sea and imagined land instead and set about walling and draining – 'inning' they call it. And in a very unusual job – working for the Romney Hythe and Dymchurch Railway both as a driver of steam trains and a maintenance worker – I was to discover the need to re-imagine both myself and my situation.

A very low point cleaning out the carriages one February – trying to get old sweets out from the back of the seats, chewing gum off the floors, in the cold, alone. A chorus from W B Yeats came to mind, from the poem 'To a Friend whose Life's Work Has come to Nothing' (that's how it felt): 'Amidst a place of stone, / be silent and exult/ because of all things known / this is most difficult'. I imagined Jesus with me, and the old concept from Herbert came to mind: 'Drudgery divine. / Who sweeps a room, as for Thy laws, / Makes that and the action fine'.

Being made in the image of God, in my view, means that God imagined the world, and humanity – and then gave us the same image-making reality-creating capacity. I now apply this to the realities of discipleship – I often hear people saying things like 'God said to me, do this or that' but I have never heard God speak. But



being new-created in Christ, I can imagine the conversation with God – and since He makes the imagined real, I take it to be real.

In the quantum universe anything is theoretically possible, so imaginative power acquires new strength and depth. In a faith which is emphatically of words-made-into-flesh-speaking-words-of-power-and-love, the poetic power of words to summon meanings beyond the surface appearance is vitally significant. God's revelation opens up opportunities for our image-bearing imagination to realize i.e. to make reality.

In my exile (another word for self-funded sabbatical?) I went as far to the edge as I could, in place, thought, and faith. But a new call came – though I resisted it. Now it's time to imagine fresh reality, to do the 'inning', not with steam, sea and fen but with spirit, mind and heart.

I'm glad to be back from exile. Ministry is much more relaxed, and much more realistic. God is closer. I said to him 'look, if I've got to go back into it, you've got to make it easy'. It's not easy but sermons come fresh from somewhere without the hours of writing, the right contacts in the community seem just to come when prayed and waited for. A black dog of depression does sometimes snap at my heels; and I have had loving support from wife and family that is more than I could have deserved. And my great teenage hero, John Lennon, is really proved quite wrong 'Imagine no religion, it's easy if you try'. I imagine the opposite is true. 

about the writer

The Revd Simon Foulkes is Vicar of Bethersden with High Halden in Kent, works with the Fresh Expressions Team in the Diocese of Canterbury, and is an amateur forester. He still drives a train occasionally. He is married to Anne.



Simon is pictured (above and top of the page) at work on the Romney Hythe and Dymchurch Railway and (right) with his wife, Anne.

