26 Dec St Marks 21

It was 1995, I was freshly unemployed due to redundancy from the job I had been in since I left school, I was 2 years off 40, living alone with a six year old. What was next for me? I had not got a clue! On the positive side, I had been given a good pay out so I did not have to panic too much about the mortgage, on the negative side I was not sure I was particularly employable and mortgage rates kept going up! This was when I found myself tentatively exploring the idea of going to university, something I had never really considered before. But an interest in art history led me to visit the Uni of Essex open event, during which I accidently ending up having an interview for the art history degree course and being offered a place! I will always remember my very first seminar with one of the many eccentric lecturers on the course. It was when a small group of us crammed into his office around a table piled high with books on top of which was perched a slide projector. And then without any teaching, or even telling us the title, he showed us a painting. And asked us to say what we thought about it. That painting was Martini’s **Christ Discovered in the Temple** [1342] which I chose for the newsletter this week. Well, of course we were all somewhat stunned into silence and experienced that fear of saying the wrong thing. Even though I had been a fairly regular church goer for the 4 years prior to this moment, I was not sure I really felt competent to say anything. I only knew that it was Mary, Joseph and Jesus, who was older than we saw him in most of the images I was used to. But once we started looking and pointing things out, something must have happened to me that day because I was hooked. The heady combination of using any clues we were given to become a type of Poiret to work out the meaning of a work of art; plus the knowledge that this had been created by an artist who was not just responding to a story but who believed in it,

So, in a way I believe that engaging with historical art began my faith journey. In fact, it can be said that this small panel painting was the big bang moment!

Looking back in order to see where God begins to nudge us into a deeper relationship with him, is often worth pondering, Even if your parents took you to church as a baby and you have never stopped going! There is a moment when you begin your personal relationship, not the one that is part of everyday life. My faith journey trundled along ever since I was taught to say Our Father at bedtime, but it did not take on a personal voyage of discovery until the moment I began to investigate the meaning and message that this artist created in paint, in response to the very gospel passage we heard today.

I love that Mary seems to have just discovered she has a truculent teen instead of the sweet babe she gave birth to; the book she holds has the words written in it that she speaks, “ Child why have you treated us this way..” a bit like a comic book speech bubble from the 14th century. Joseph seems to be trying to make the peace between them – not sure how effective it is… but the look on Jesus’ face, coupled with his folded arms, makes me smile- all those centuries ago and teenagers still act the same way, even if they are the Son of God!

And then he says, “Why were you searching for me..?” Der… you have been missing for three days, you are only 12, there are people who are pretty dangerous around… you never left a message…. I think his parents have the right here, although many might nod their heads wisely and say – well, He is divine – he is God’s Son, he has every right to put them in their place. I say – nope – God entrusted his son to be born and brought up by earthly parents and learn from them what being a human was all about – and human parents, mostly, worry about their kids.

It is a wonderful painting of Jesus and his earthly family learning from each other what it is like to have care of each other.

26 years after I first encountered this painting which began for me a personal relationship with God, I still love to look at it. And today as I gaze upon it – I can imagine Jesus saying to me, “ Why were you searching for me?” and my answer is, because with you my life is filled with awe, wonder and love, and when it is tough, I know that you will never ever let me go. Amen