

Stop! In the name of God!

Belting up the West Coast Main Line recently at 125 mph in one of Mr. Branson's 11 car Pendolinos, we had left Crewe on time, called at Warrington Bank Quay, but then ground ominously to a halt in the middle of nowhere but short of Wigan North Western, our next stop. No word comes. Signal failure? Failed freight train? Eventually we crawl into Wigan and find another Pendolino in the platform, doors open, and folk milling about.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, I am sorry to tell you that a train going north over Shap has brought down the overhead wires. Nothing can get past it coming south and everything going north is stacked up behind it. We are going to be here for some time". You sense the frisson of stress and frustration rising. People sigh and return to their unsolved crosswords; they re-open their laptops and essay some more work; mobiles are brought out and friends and family bear the brunt of the frustration. What do you do when you are stopped in your tracks?

I would like to say I get my Bible out and read it, but that would not be true! I do tend to carry a volume of R. S. Thomas poetry with me. Most of the poems are no longer than a page but I find they hold me up in other ways. Unusual questions, odd ideas, strange turns of phrase. You sit and ponder. You can imagine the scenery which may have prompted them. Images of God that are unfamiliar and kind of elude you. A mysterious God. There is a wonderful one called 'pilgrimages' which at one level is about a particular island but at another is about your own sense of journey. It has the wonderful notion of a 'fast moving God – leaving as we arrive'. Certainly faster than the Pendolino at this moment! And you might ask "to which place is God calling me?", as opposed to bothering about "will I get home in time for tea?".

Another thing I sometimes do is a breathing exercise coupled with the words of the Jesus prayer. So I breathe in to the words "Lord Jesus Christ, son of the Father", and breathe out to the words "have mercy on me, a sinner". You breathe the Lord Jesus into your system and breathe out all the rubbish. And you repeat this for a wee while. It slows you down physically and inhibits the rise of your own stresses and anxieties about getting home on time. I wonder if the folk stuck on the line over Shap are enjoying the view (if the weather lets them see it). Not a lot at Wigan North Western to stimulate my sense of awe and wonder, alas.

So being stopped in your tracks, in this literal sense, may not be a problem, rather an opportunity. You can let go of the natural responses of stress, anxiety and frustration. You might find yourself able to enjoy a view of open moorland and hills – perhaps even of industrial and railway architecture. You might start to ponder more deeply about the journey that is your life. You might find ways to ponder and reflect on the mystery of God. And to see whether you are being invited to change direction, get off this train, and go somewhere else.

Even more radically you might CHOOSE to stop in your tracks, and not wait until Mr. Branson or the overhead wires force the opportunity upon you. This coming weekend is **“Stop! In the name of God”** weekendⁱ. This initiative of the Retreat Association invites us to explore the potential of silence, stillness and prayer. In particular it invites us to this exploration not necessarily in a holy, churchy, religious or retreat type centre, but in the sheer ordinary places of life – perhaps even on a train stuck at Wigan North Western.

We eventually crawled into Preston, where we were ushered into queues outside the station for buses and coaches that were being summoned to take us onward. And, of course, what happens is that strangers start talking to each other! You start to absorb people’s panic and anxiety as they tell you about a crucial work meeting missed; an ill relative unvisited; a budding romance stalled. So here is an opportunity for unspoken intercession for needs of which you would otherwise be unaware. And you are simply with people, waiting together to find a way forward and onward.

So this weekend **you invited, in the name of God, to CHOOSE to stop for a set period**. It might be in a church, a garden, a place of beauty; or it might not – perhaps on a park bench, in a motorway cafe, in a place where you may have to be but can choose to “switch off and let the world go by”. Your environment may offer you images of God – God at play; Jesus eating with others; the Holy Spirit brooding over a local lake – on which you can fruitfully ponder or meditate.

John Rackley, the Chair of the Retreat Association at the time the initiative was begun, wrote “I hope that we will see all sorts of new ways of exploring spirituality based on silent engagement with the needs of our world and the gracious activity of God. In our society where there is so much haste and urgency, Stop! In the name of God offers an important counter-cultural sign. A day based on silence would be a profound act of prophetic symbolism”.

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ⁱ Since 1993, the Retreat Association has promoted a weekend of quiet reflection during the summer months, enabling Christians across the UK to organise local events promoting the value of silence and stillness. The 2017 will be from 7 to 9 July and a number of events have already been planned – see <http://www.retreats.org.uk/stop.php> for more information.