

When God doesn't turn up.

At the end of February we were travelling north on the A1. It was evening and we were on our way to Holy Island. The warning had sounded in the car that it was zero outside and to beware of ice. The traffic thinned as we left Newcastle further behind us. The darkness was punctuated occasionally by car headlights coming towards us. The road seemed to stretch endlessly ahead.

We eventually turned right on to the narrow country road that leads down to the causeway. Suddenly the landscape was flooded with light. A full moon, larger than normal, had risen and broken through the cloud. The tide had recently opened and there were large pools and sand on the road, as we drove slowly over to the island. Beyond the gentle, tranquil sea shimmered with beauty. In the distance we could see the welcoming lights of the village.



Sometimes, the road we are asked to travel in life is every bit as dark as the A1 that night. We say, “Where is God”, and he is absent. Perhaps, from time to time there are pinpricks of light and for a brief moment we know he is there. Just as a passing car during the hours of darkness is soon swallowed up in the night so his Presence departs from us.

Recently a book came into our hands where the author describes his experience of the absence of God. He was allowed to use a small cabin in the Alps and he purposed to spend two months there waiting on God. There was sacrifice involved as by nature he loved being with people. His enthusiasm for this venture wavered and then deserted him completely. God did not turn up! “The silence was empty --- I wept over God’s absence ----- I hammered on the walls of the cabin demanding his presence. This was a crisis of faith. How could I believe any more?” When he was on the verge of despair God revealed himself. “Up there in that alpine cabin one morning ---- there came a tearful and profound moment --- Kneeling on the wooden floor I told God I would no longer treat him as if I owned him ---- I let him go. I asked for the life that was his gift alone. Something died that day – and something was born.”ⁱ

We remember a friend of ours who many years ago, facing a crisis in his life, would take a lantern in his hand and cross the empty sands to Hilbre Island at night shouting into the darkness, “Where are you God?” As far as we recollect there was only silence in reply. But he is still a deeply committed Christian so somewhere, somehow the glory broke afresh into his life. It is the Lord who chooses the time not us. When we are least expecting it the landscape floods with light. It is his sovereign will not ours. God is God. It is all grace. It is entirely gift.

It is his sovereign will, too when the glory fades and only pinpricks of light pierce the darkness. He is there although we do not see him. He loves us even when our hearts are cold and perhaps, rebellious. As Amy Carmichael wrote, we learn the lessons of “the weaned child”, patience, perseverance and Christian character.

ⁱ Space for God David Runcorn