

God at work in the world – 1 John 4:7-21

How good are you at observing things? Do you notice what's going on around you? Or are you sometimes unaware of things that should be plain?

Today we are thinking a bit about looking – looking to see what's happening in the world around us. We will be using the second section from the prayer that we prayed last time, and will be praying again tonight – about looking and seeing . Looking to see where God is working in the world.

But first, how good are we at seeing things?

Here's a short video clip.

Its easy to think that we are good at seeing things. But often we're not if we're not looking.

The truth is that our mind and our attention can be so focused on one thing that we miss another that should be blindingly obvious. We miss the gorilla on the screen or the elephant in the room.

Another thing that I've realised over the years is that there are some kinds of things I notice quite easily, and others I don't seem to see at all. Some things pass me by, while others stand out a mile to me – but to you they might seem insignificant and not noticeable.

Sad person that I am, I have more than a passing interest in trains, and I tend to notice things about trains. Like in the Gary Oldman film Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy released a few years ago, there is a scene where a hotel room Smiley has booked overlooks some railway lines which are supposed to be just outside Liverpool Street Station. To me it was abundantly clear that the lines had third rail electrification and therefore had to be in South London, as Liverpool Street would have overhead power lines.

Similarly in the Bond movie Skyfall, the scene on the underground which is supposed to be on a District Line train travelling from Temple to Westminster, but is actually on a Jubilee line train of a completely different design and size. I told you I was sad!

But we do tend to notice the things that resonate with us, that interest us.

But it may also be simply down to our personality. Some of us when we enter a room full of people notice what they are wearing, the colour of their hair, how tall or short they are. Others will notice how they are getting along with each other, who is included and who is excluded, who seems to be enjoying the experience

and who is not. They will be more aware of feelings than facts. Some things come more naturally to each of us than others.

So sometimes what we notice is to do with what we are concentrating on – the number of passes the team in white make; sometimes its to do with what interests us – the trains for me; and sometimes with who we are, our personality type if you like – whether we notice facts or feelings.

But each of these and more can blind us to everything else. And perhaps in the busy-ness and activity of life we often are blind to where God is at work. Blind to seeing God active in what is his world. Because we are so busy seeing where we are at work and what affects us.

Let's think for a moment about tonight's section of our prayer:

*You keep us looking
You, the God of all space
Want us to look
For signs of hope
For people who are hopeless
For visions of a better world which will appear
Among the disappointments of the world we know.*

Now, this brief meditation could finish by me simply saying that we need to keep our eyes open, to broaden what we are on the look-out for, to widen our horizons. There is no great theological mystery to unravel here.

But I do have a few thoughts about God at work – in the past, the present and the future.

Perhaps its easiest to see God at work in the past; to see where God has been even if at the time we didn't notice it.

We can look back over our lives, and others' lives and see a bigger picture. We can see results of decisions and actions, we can see themes and trends and we can see the wide arc of God's love and care.

But first we need to remind ourselves that we live in a world where we have freedom of choice, free will. Freedom to choose good paths or bad ones, freedom to make mistakes as well as to get things right; freedom to mess things up as well as to put things right. Freedom to listen to God, but also to close our eyes and ears to him or simply ignore him.

We live in a world where things are not perfect; where there is pain and suffering; where there is illness and death; where there are earthquakes and tsunamis. Some

things caused by what we do to each other or have done to the planet; others through the fact that the whole creation is somehow out of kilter with God and his purposes.

So when we look back, we shouldn't 'blame' God for things that are the results of our actions, and we don't actually get anywhere by trying to blame him for so called natural disasters.

But we can look back and see how we – and how others – have coped with things. How we have handled the challenges that we have faced; how we have reacted to others in those situations.

We can look back into times that were painful and see where love, compassion, care and concern have been shown. And when we see these things we see God, because, as we were reminded in our reading, God is love.

So perhaps the key is to open our eyes to acts of love – and when we see them we will likely be glimpsing God at work, no matter who is involved. For God works through all people. We are all created in his image, with the potential to show love and compassion and care and concern, but also with the capacity to inflict pain and suffering and hurt.

And this is not just about the past, it can also help us see where God is in the world today.

This week, I particular because of this service, I have been trying to see where God is active in the world and, amongst the things I have seen are these.

A law is being passed in Parliament about transplants. Its being called Max and Keira's law and will change things to mean that consent is assumed in situations of organ donation. But the story behind this is heartwarming.

Keira Ball was 9 when she was killed in a road accident. But her organs have saved the lives of 4 people, including Max who received her heart and can now live a virtually normal life. You may have seen Max on TV this week expressing his gratitude and his wishes that others might similarly benefit in the future. Hence the reason for the change in law. In my view, definitely God was at work to bring good from bad, love from tragedy, hope from despair.

And then there was the story of Kane Walker, a homeless man who died on the streets of Birmingham in the freezing weather of January. Kane was well known. Many people stopped to talk with him and buy him a sandwich & coffee. Sadly, his life was marred by drug addiction and mental health issues.

I have officiated at the funerals of the homeless in the past, and they are usually small, sad affairs with no mourners – just a simple coffin paid for by the local authority. It used to be called a pauper's funeral.

But the people of Birmingham rallied round for Kane and made donations to give him a proper send off with many of those who used to speak to him attending. Again, love out of a tragedy, good out of bad. God at work through people actions and in this case donations.

So can you look for moments of love and concern in the places where you live, where you work, where you spend your time? Can you try to identify moments of hope shining through where the world is often full of despair? Will you make a point of looking for the good rather than complaining about the bad?

And the last thought tonight is about the future. We talk about having visions. Visions of a better world; visions of the church and the kingdom; visions of God acting.

But a vision is, by its definition and derivation, about looking, seeing and in particular about looking into the future.

When we look to the future do we hope to see acts of love, to see kindness, to see care and concern? Do we hope to see God at work? And are we ourselves committed to being that hope?

Are we committed to being the ones who will show the love of God, who will show compassion and concern, who will ensure the hope becomes real in our lives and in the lives of others? Are we committed to being God's agent at work in the world?

Or are we so wrapped up in our own interests and concerns, or maybe those of our immediate family or even those of the church, that we don't see the bigger picture and miss God acting in and changing the world and miss our chance to be God's agents acting in the world.

So today in our response, I invite you to look back, think about your situation now, or look to the future. Do all three if you wish.

But think about where you have glimpsed God in the past; where you might see him now and where you hope to see him – or perhaps be him – in the future.

And then, if you wish, put a post it on the board.

Blue for God in the past, pink for God now, and yellow for our hopes of God in the future.