What are the defining moments of your life? And might you have missed them?

Do you know what I’m talking about if I talk about moments when the world stops? When you are, sometimes literally, stopped in your tracks by something extraordinary? It could be something of great beauty, or something of sheer horror. It could be a juxtaposition of things – light falling in an unusual way across a familiar scene, or a person you know well in an unexpected situation.

They are moments when you may see the world in a new way, realise something with a tremendous clarity which you otherwise might have missed. And those moments are often highly memorable, and join other markers by which we navigate our lives. We may find ourselves telling the story of them years later, and they may become fixed points in a community’s memory. We have them here, of course, by the score in the Cathedral: a classic example would be the moment when Jock Forbes looked down from the tower into the rubble of the burned cathedral and noticed two beams fallen in the shape of a cross. That’s perhaps not surprising, to be honest – a cross shape is hardly unusual, and a collapsed building might be expected to have a few pieces of fallen wood or masonry that had fallen across each other: but this was different, it was a moment when the world, crashing around everyone’s ears, suddenly stopped and stood still, and Mr Forbes turned aside to look. He stopped, and saw. He saw something in such a way that God was able to speak to him, and subsequently to literally millions of others about his presence in the midst of destruction.

Often these moments can about noticing something obvious, and perhaps well known, if not to ourselves, certainly to others. Coventry and its story is still quite new to me, so I find myself turning aside, pausing, sometimes gasping, at something which others know well. This coming week I am travelling to Berlin, and to Dresden. I’ve never been to either, so I went into a Waterstones to have a glance at travel books about where I was going. Ricarda was with me, and as I leafed through Baedeker’s guide I gasped and called her over. You see, I had not realised that I was going to Dresden on the anniversary of the Allied Bombing of their city, February 13th 1945. It was a turning aside moment, a moment when the world shifted ever so slightly on its axis for me – a moment that I will always remember. A moment when something which is true, and known to be true, became true for me, and in my life. A moment of revelation, a moment of connection with something far beyond myself and my own personal history, but something which was now part of my history, my story.

The burning bush in the desert near Mount Horeb, described in the passage from Exodus 3, is not actually of itself unique, or necessarily miraculous. There is a bush known to botanists which gives off methane in certain conditions, and can be lit, and is not consumed – I’m told there is one in the gardens of St. John’s College Oxford. So the important thing that happened there in the desert in the early, formative years of Moses’ adult life, was not that a bush was burning, but that God stopped him in his tracks and brought Moses’ story into God’s greater story.

There have, of course, been many many things written about this encounter. I love the title of a book called, ‘Every bush is burning’: there is nothing in this life which cannot in itself somehow be a vehicle for God to reveal himself to us.

The phrase in the story which I want to commend to you today, in the week of the beginning of Lent, is this: Moses turned aside. And when the Lord saw that he had turned aside, he called him, and revealed himself to him. Lent is, as you know, a time for turning aside. For not just looking, but seeing. It could be a time for seeing things here in the cathedral in a new way. For all I know, Moses had seen these burning bushes often, but on this occasion he said, “I
really should have a look at this!” Someone said to me as I arrived here that my experience of seeing things for the first time in Coventry might enable others, too to see them afresh – that may be true. I will probably bore you with things that are new and special to me, and old and boring to you.

But it could be that the Lord is calling you to turn aside, perhaps as you walk past the ruins, maybe turning aside into them for the first time for years, perhaps finding your way to sit by one of the tablets of the word, or in the light as it falls in a particular way across the floor. It could be that the Lord is calling you to turn aside in quite another place, perhaps in the city centre, or near where you live, or in your family.

Lent is a time for asking God to renew our vision, not just to look and hear and move on, but to see, and to listen. To stop. To find ourselves in a place of holiness, set aside by God to meet with us, and perhaps to direct our lives afresh. God waited for Moses to turn aside, and then he spoke to him. Are you ready to turn and find God waiting for you. It may be here. It may be in the world. But extraordinarily, God is waiting for you to stop, this Lent: let’s do that for a moment now.