I wonder if you have a set of clothes that you regard as ‘Sunday best’? Although some of us do indeed maintain the tradition of having a special set of clothes for Sunday, my hunch is that this is nothing like as common as it used to be.

I can vividly remember my ‘Sunday best’ as a teenager in the mid-1970s – when, in so many ways, we took leave of our senses. It was a combination of which I was inordinately proud at the time – a powder blue jacket, aubergine trousers, white shirt and a carefully-selected tie to match! I resembled nothing so much as an over-enthusiastic supporter of Aston Villa Football Club. And no, there are no photos...

Actually – spiritually speaking, ‘Sunday best’ is a disaster waiting to happen – even if you have something rather more refined than my teenage fashion sense, which, let’s face it, would not be difficult. For the thing about ‘Sunday best’ is that it invites us to focus on the outward appearance at the expense of the reality of what is going on inside. ‘Sunday best’ instils within us the idea that God prefers it when we’ve made a bit of an effort. ‘Sunday best’ risks setting us up in competition with one another.

Of course, putting on our ‘Sunday best’ doesn’t have to do these and I’m well aware that there is another side to it. Honouring God and one another by taking the time and trouble to make ourselves look our best is fine. Fine – but hazardous!

From Thursday to Saturday this last week, the Cathedral has played host to a drama production entitled ‘Meet Me in the Ruins’ as part of our centenary Plumbline Arts Festival. I was present for yesterday afternoon’s performance, which was, I have to say, deeply moving and thought-provoking. Cleverly interwoven with the hymn ‘Abide with me’ and lasting just over an hour, ‘Meet Me in the Ruins’ is a series of five short plays celebrating the one hundred years of our Cathedral’s history. We watched a series of imagined encounters between a number of people, each at a series of crossroads in their lives, in 2010, 1987, 1962, 1947 and, finally, right back to 1918. ‘Meet Me in the Ruins’.

It’s such a striking and evocative phrase, isn’t it? Especially when we take our cue from one of this week’s plays in particular and identify the ‘Me’ as God. Might we, can we, should we... expect him to meet us in the Ruins? Meet Me in the Ruins – not simply the area at the stop of the steps beyond the West Screen but all that the idea of ‘Ruins’ represents and stands for in our lives. Both in our own individual lives and in the life of the world around us. The mistakes that have had catastrophic consequences. The relationships that have gone sadly wrong. The hopes that have been cruelly disappointed. The circumstances which have led to things not going the way they should have done. The fears of what might happen and the debilitating anxiety they provoke. Meet Me, says God, in all the devastation, in all the mess, in all the untidiness, of the Ruins.

We’re inclined to think that God feels most at home when things are going well – when we are, as it were, in our ‘Sunday best’. But that is, I think, at best questionable and at worst downright wrong. Perhaps we could underline this by having a Sunday when we all wear our most disreputable gardening or decorating clothes!

One of the key things we learn from the letter of James is that God doesn’t take account of ‘Sunday best’ He makes no distinctions between people – certainly not based on how they look! – which, challenging though it is, is something he intends us to reflect in the way that we treat one another and those who come among us too. So much so that to discriminate between people based on outward qualities like wealth and status is to cast doubt on the reality of our faith. It couldn’t be clearer, could it? Verse 1: ‘...do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? And verse 9: ‘...if you show partiality, you commit sin.’
Perhaps it would help us to realise that God is equally unfazed about the state we’re in on the inside as we come to him. We don’t have to behave as though everything in the garden is lovely. Even if we feel the need to pretend in front of other people, we don’t have to do this with him. None of it surprises him. And it doesn’t put him off. However tarnished and bedraggled and untidy the inner reflection of our ‘Sunday best’ may be, he welcomes us with open arms. ‘Meet Me in the Ruins’ is what he says. This is where I am to be found.

But – just to be clear – not always found easily.

This is the somewhat disconcerting message of today’s Gospel reading. Jesus is, temporarily at least, in hiding. He has gone to the non-Jewish city of Tyre, the main seaport of the Roman province of Syria and Phoenicia, and ‘did not want anyone to know he was there’. Mark tells us, though, that ‘he could not escape notice’ and that a local woman comes to seek his help.

She is a remarkable woman. The thing is that there are so many things against her. So many barriers in her way. So much rubble in the Ruins to get in her way.

For a start she’s a foreigner. People in her part of the world knew what to expect from their Jewish neighbours. She shouldn’t think that their God will be interested in her. She isn’t a member of the chosen race. She’s a Gentile. And as if that wasn’t bad enough, she is a woman. The discrimination that many women still face in the world today is as nothing compared to what went on then. She was very much looked down on as a second-class citizen.

And then to cap it all there’s the attitude of Jesus. It seems so peculiar. Why does he do as he does? Why does he seem to be pouring cold water on all her desperate hopes that he might heal her daughter? Here she is, at the end of verse 25, having fallen at his feet and, verse 26, literally begging him to help her. And what does he say? Verse 27: ‘Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’ Not the most encouraging response, to say the least!

But the key thing is to look at the woman’s reply. She detects no trace of cruelty or rudeness in what Jesus says. It’s almost like banter between them, isn’t it? Verse 28: ‘Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs.’ The push back gives her the opportunity to demonstrate the reality, the seriousness, the tenacity of her faith.

And that’s what does it. That’s what turns this encounter into an opportunity for healing and transformation. ‘For saying that’, says Jesus, you may go — the demon has left your daughter. So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.’

Here’s the thing. Like the Cathedral in the years following the bombing in 1940, there’s rubble in them there Ruins! On the surface out there it looks now as though it’s all been cleared away, of course. But in some ways it’s still there. Indeed, rubble will always be there. The rubble that we need to clamber over in order to meet him in the Ruins. The challenge of finding that we too are called not to dabble, not to play at it, not to tinker on the surface – but to demonstrate the reality, the seriousness, the tenacity of our faith. May God sustain and help us to do just that. And respond in faith and obedience to his life-transforming invitation to ‘Meet Me in the Ruins’. Amen.

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