

On Friday night I had a strange dream. Now, none of us can afford to dismiss dreams as garbled nonsense: if Joseph had dismissed *his* dreams he would never have accepted Mary into his home and he would never have taken mother and child with him into Egypt to escape Herod's murderous intentions.

The Gospel story – and the story of our faith – would have been quite different.

Throughout the entire history of humanity dreams have been taken with the utmost seriousness. In ancient Greece, someone suffering from a physical or a psychological illness would go to a temple of Asklepius – the most famous one was at Epidaurus – the god of medicine and healing; the World Health Organisation still has Asklepius' staff as its logo. The sufferer would sleep for three nights in the temple, praying for a diagnostic dream, which would then be interpreted by the priest. The idea that God speaks in dreams – *vox Dei in somno* – is as old as we are. It is only now, in our western society that the mystery of dreams has been generally lost – unsurprisingly, since the soul has been thrown onto the rubbish heap by an addiction to 'scientific objectivity'. Yet it was a scientist, Dr James Watson, who discovered the double helix structure of DNA when he had a dream of two entwined serpents with heads and opposite ends – and a double spiral staircase.

So, I share my Friday night dream with you not with a touch of humour, but a measure of gravitas.

It concerned a fellow priest in this diocese – he shall remain nameless, of course – who had gathered around him a small group of other priests and they declared that their common aim was to ‘swim against the tide’ – by which I understood that they would make a stand against the social, moral, cultural and political values of our society. These values, they believed, had lost all ethical principles, integrity, meaning and purpose.

Then, the next morning, Saturday, looking through the readings for this weekend, I saw these lines in the second reading, the Letter of St Paul to the Romans:

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

This was more-or-less the message that I dreamed of in a personalized, visual form: “Do not conform to the pattern of the world...” In other words, ‘swim against the tide,’ as those priests in the dream were preparing to do. Swimming against the tide is probably one of the most important tasks of faith and spiritual practice; it always has been, but in our day and age it has assumed an absolutely crucial importance. Our faith is rooted in a man who swam against the tide – social, cultural and religious – in almost every possible way.

Small wonder he was seen as such a threat by the clerical status quo, but was loved by the ordinary people, the small people, the unimportant and marginalized people. And he loved them in return.

Swimming against the tide is never easy – it is a daunting and often dispiriting challenge. As the Hassidic mystics said:

“You are not expected to succeed in the task. But neither are you allowed to abandon it.”

The Beatitudes, given in the Sermon on the Mount, are the supreme charter for swimming against the tide, because they completely reverse the values of this world and replace them with the *characteristics* of that transcendent reality we so faintly and inadequately call ‘the Kingdom of God’. This world is characterized by cold pity for the poor, by embarrassment at the fact of death and those who grieve, contempt for the gentle, ridicule for the pure and by resistance to those who work for peace – mainly because there are too many individuals and institutions who make money out of war. It is a world of political, economic and social injustice, oppression and ambition. It is vast multinational corporations which ravage and destroy poor nations for bigger profits; it is political ambition which persecutes and causes wars for greater power; it is the kingdoms and empires of our day when money is control, control is power, and when some people’s wealth is too great to be reckoned while others lack the bare necessities of life.

St Paul says: "... offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God" – which means swimming against the tide that regards everyone's body as their own to do whatever they like with, for pleasure or pain, regardless of the consequences. He says: "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind..." – which means swimming against the tide that fills everyone's mind with the lowest kind of populist entertainment, with the longing for 'celebrity' or social influence, or enslavement to identity politics. Sometimes, when we admit we didn't watch the latest episode of 'I'm-an-X-Factor-Celebrity-Love-Island-Big-Brother-I've-got-Talent', we're made to feel that we've come from a planet that doesn't often orbit the earth... or just an old misery.

In my dream, I felt that I was unable to join this group of priests, because their swimming against the tide was going to take some dramatic form: not quite blowing up the Bank of England or kidnapping Simon Cowell, but something similar. I felt in the dream – and I have always felt for most of my life – that the grand gesture is not for me. I'm not psychologically capable of it. Grand gestures scare me – and I'm not ashamed to admit that; I'm not ashamed because, although Jesus made the grandest gesture of all on the cross, he always loved the small gestures, the ordinary acts, the little movements of love and trust. Think of the widow who put only two small coins into the Treasury, or Zacchaeus who climbed a tree to see Jesus, or the woman with the haemorrhage who merely touched the fringe of his garment,

or the tax collector who stood a long way off and beat his breast, or the little children that he blessed and said they belong to the Kingdom.

St Thérèse of Lisieux said: 'If you pick up a pin for no other reason than the love of God, you can save souls.'

I think that is my way: 'the path of the pin'. With God's grace I, too, swim against the tide, but I do so in quietness, in recognition of my own weakness, knowing the paucity of my heart's resources, accepting the instinctive caution of my temperament. But I rejoice in that! Swimming against the tide, in any case, is a matter of outlook, of what the Germans call a *Weltanschauung* – a way of understanding the world; and that understanding can be expressed in countless creative, imaginative ways. A priest who once belonged to this diocese but subsequently joined a religious order has been imprisoned three times for public protests against nuclear weapons; I could never do that, but I *can* spend time with someone who appears tedious and tiresome but needs to be listened to. Because the world has no time for those who need someone to listen to them, that priest and I are both swimming against the tide, each in our own way and according to our capacity. God is more than satisfied with that. We have no need to think that we are too small, too timid, too unremarkable, too fearful, to swim against the tide. When we swim, we are swimming in the Ocean of Love.

Besides, it is my opinion that spending time with someone who needs to be listened to, takes far more courage than blowing up the Bank of England.