

ELVIS - A GUIDE TO THE HOLY SPIRIT - 27 APRIL 2008

In Our Gospel reading this morning Jesus tells the disciples of the Holy Spirit, "This is the Spirit of truth... You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you." (John 14:17) He abides with you - he will be with you.

Yes, we believe it, but how are we to explain it to others?

You know, it's possible that Elvis Presley is alive and well and living just down the road. Possible, but of course not likely. Nevertheless, since news of his death made headlines in 1977, some people have built lucrative careers trying to prove that the rock'n'roll super-celebrity they call "The King" still lives. One author has sold millions of copies of books on the subject, and set up a premium rate phone line on which you can hear Elvis' voice. If you've seen him, by the way (he would be 73 years old), you can click on a website to report the sighting. For more than 50 years, Presley fans have believed the only time he ever set foot in the UK was during a stop-over at Prestwick Airport in March 1960. But the news of a second visit has only just leaked out. Tommy Steele invited him over on a flying private visit. Elvis flew into London for a day, Tommy Steele apparently took him round the city, showing him famous landmarks such as the Houses of Parliament. Tommy Steele, now 71, said: "I can only hope he [Presley] can forgive me. It was supposed to be a secret."

Those who believe - who hope - that he is alive offer the following arguments: Elvis' middle name, Aaron, was misspelt on his gravestone – a sure sign, they say, that his body wasn't there. And of course, the name Elvis is an anagram of the word "lives".

Yes, we know it's nonsense: Elvis has, well and truly, as they say, "left the building", and the recording of his voice on the web site has been found to be that of an impersonator.

If, like me, you are not that struck on Elvis, perhaps you have another star whom you would do almost anything to see: mine would be Emma Kirkby. Or perhaps you're an opera buff, whose ambition is to see Plácido Domingo at Covent Garden, or a football fan who travels hundreds of miles to see your team play. I think we have this feeling that there's something amazing,

wonderful even, about sharing the earth with a truly great performer or player, and we'll go to great lengths and vast expense to catch the live act.

What on earth is he banging on about now? Well, it seems to me that some people seem to regard Jesus as the original rock star – a precursor of Bob Dylan, Mick Jagger and Madonna. The hit musical – *Jesus Christ, Superstar* – spelled this out. Indeed, even two thousand years after he lived, it's obvious that Jesus was a deeply charismatic man, but if we treat him as a rock superstar we make two fundamental mistakes.

We find the first mistake shown clearly in the first reading from Acts. As Paul points out to the Athenians, they have tried to understand God by reducing him to the size that they can understand. They have all the usual deities, and just to be on the safe side, they have made up a shrine for the catch-all unknown God. This God, Paul tells them, is the God who raised Jesus the Christ from the dead. This is the God who made the universe, and they have tried to lock Him up in a shrine made by human hands. In effect they are making God smaller than themselves.

Jesus did not seek a great cult status. In fact he particularly avoided this temptation - when after his baptism there were temptations that tried to seduce him to do it the easy way, to take the Rock Star road. If you and I try to turn him into a rock-star figure, a wonderworking charismatic preacher, we, like the Athenians, lock him up in a human invention – that of celebrity culture. We get God terribly wrong if we do that.

The second mistake leads us to a perpetual sense of loss. If we think of Jesus as the “live act” we never got to see, we end up treating Jesus as a myth, a wonderful memory and nothing more, and the Holy Spirit becomes some sort of mere supporting act - to stay with the stage metaphor. And we miss out on the full potential of Christian life. For as Jesus promised, and as Paul testifies to the Athenians, “In him we live and move and have our being.” That was Jesus’ promise then; it is his promise still, through the awesome power of the Holy Spirit. He abides with you - he will be with you. A reality - still very much in the building.

It was so much easier for the Apostles to give that vibrant witness to the reality of Jesus, even when he had gone. They had been with him and knew him. Two thousand years later, we the Church have been waiting so long for

the encore, that our clapping is half-hearted at times. The house lights have gone on, showing up a shabby, litter-strewn auditorium - surely it's time to call it a day and go home? If we are honest, our faith fails us at times. Will he ever return? Are we actually waiting for someone who really has 'left the building' for good?

I am so glad that we have the example of the apostles who, despite having the T-shirts to prove they'd "been there, done that", were sometimes decidedly shaky in faith. They had known, had walked and talked and eaten with the living Jesus - yet their faith sometimes failed.

Those people who so earnestly wish that Elvis had overcome death are simply expressing the human yearning for immortality. It's only human to fear death; it's only human to put other human beings on pedestals; it's only human, when so much is unknown, to worship unknown gods. Sadly our tawdry celebrity culture is no different from the one that Paul met in Athens. Lots of different gods, and a nod towards the 'unknown one'. And of course we grope, in our pick and mix spirituality, for anything that will give us that 'other reality' or that sense of 'getting to know our real selves'.

But, once we start to realise that we **didn't** miss the live act; that the Holy Spirit, rather than being a pale imitation of Christ, *brings* Christ and *is* God, we start to move beyond our human limitations. We do have an insight into that other reality - the Kingdom of God. We can catch glimpses of this in worship, in prayer. We can find our true selves, not the shell we show to everyone else, as we come closer in prayer, and the Holy Spirit fills us.

Our challenge, as modern Christians, is to turn away from the meaningless chatter of celebrity, to look up, and see our faith as meaningful, vibrant and valid. This we do through invoking the Holy Spirit through prayer and praise, to work in and through us.

Then the task is to go and live in the power of that same spirit in the world where God has placed us, and to show others, if necessary to tell others, that Christ is Risen, that God is real, here and now, in the building.

