

Evensong

3 before Lent

9 February 2020

In a couple of weeks, I begin my Windows into Christian poetry course, and to get us in the mood *just* a little, although it is not Christian, here is something I recently heard and would like to share with you.

From time to time, people tell me, "lighten up, it's just a dog," or "that's a lot of money for just a dog." They don't understand the distance travelled, the time spent, or the costs involved for "just a dog."

Some of my proudest moments have come about with "just a dog." Many hours have passed, and my only company was "just a dog," but I did not once feel slighted.

Some of my saddest moments have been brought about by "just a dog," and in those days of darkness, the gentle touch of "just a dog" gave me comfort and reason to overcome the day.

If you, too, think it's "just a dog," then you will probably understand phrases like "just a friend," "just a sunrise," or "just a promise."

"Just a dog" brings into my life the very essence of friendship, trust, and pure and unbridled joy.

"Just a dog" brings out the compassion and patience that makes me a better person.

Because of "just a dog," I will rise early, take long walks and look longingly to the future. So, for me and folks like me, it's not "just a dog" but an embodiment of all the hopes and dreams of the future, the fond memories of the past, and the pure joy of the moment.

I hope that someday they can understand that it's not "just a dog," but the thing that gives me humanity and keeps me from being "just a man," or "just a woman." So, the next time you hear the phrase "just a dog," just smile--because they "just don't understand."

You are here this evening, amidst all the stormy weather outside, because this is "just" Evensong. We have heard the Choir, who turned up at 3 o'clock for "just" a rehearsal, and we have sat through the various parts of the service, listening to the sung bits because it's "just a psalm," or its "just" the Mag and Nunc. We have listened to that stand-alone musical item following the third collect because it was "just the anthem."

We have sung ourselves because there are parts of the service where it's "just" the hymn. We have also listened, listened to the lessons because it's "just" the Bible being read. You are listening to me now because it's "just" the sermon.

But, because of "just" the psalm, I am connected to the thoughts and feelings of ordinary people thousands of years ago who praised and imprecated in equal measure. I have railed against the bad things of the world as well as seeing God as the most fundamental thing of my life, because he has 'searched me out and known me.'

Because of "just" the Bible, I have been put in touch with some of the most wonderful words ever written – 'If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal,' as well as, perhaps, other less edifying passages.

Because of "just" the anthem, I have been transported to parts of my being where the gap between earth and heaven are as thin as the hair on the top of my head, moved to tears and to cries of exaltation.

Because of "just" the sermon I have been given insights to held-ling truths that have stopped and made me think that the truth is more elusive than I ever thought it was.

Because of "just" Evensong, I have found moments of stillness and peace, where the burdens of the day have dissipated into an awareness of being held and loved by God, I have found moments of shared beauty, hearing psalm singing of subtlety and depth, a Howells Gloria that makes me want to shout out with praise as the last chord echoes around this space, listening to sermons, good and not so good, where everyone giving them has shared something of themselves, gathering to sing *Spem in alium* with 39 other similarly moved people to produce that awesome, rapturous sound of forty voices singing as one, celebrating my wife's birthday with a commission from Russel Pascoe. All this because it is "just" Evensong.

So, the next time you hear someone say that they are off to the pub to see Burnley play Sheffield United because the alternative is "just" Evensong, just smile because they simply do not understand.

And whatever moves you, elevates you, connects you with a greater reality, be it Evensong, a walk by the coast, dinner with your lifelong lover and companion, or "just" a dog, then in the quiet of your heart "just" say thank you, and rejoice that I do so because this is "just" who I am.

God of stillness and of quiet ...

- Still the fever I inhale from all the energy that surrounds me, that makes my life feel small. Let me know that my own life is enough. Give me the grace to sit at peace inside my own life.
- Still my anxiety, my heartaches, my worries, and stop me from always being outside the present moment. Give me the grace to know that you have pronounced my name in love, that my name is written in heaven, that I am free to live without anxiety.
- Still my unrelenting need to be busy all the time, to occupy myself, to be always planning for tomorrow, to fill every minute with some activity, to seek distraction rather than quiet. Give me the grace to sit in a quiet that lets me savour a sunset and actually taste the water I'm drinking.
- Still my unforgiving thoughts, the grudges I nurse from my past, from the betrayals I've suffered. Quiet in me the guilt I carry from my own betrayals. Still in me all that's wounded, unresolved, bitter and unforgiving. Give me the quiet that comes from forgiveness.
- Still my heart so that I may know that you are God, that I may know that you create and sustain my every breath, that you breathe the whole universe into existence every second, that everyone, myself no less than everyone else, is your beloved, that you want our lives to flourish, that you desire our happiness, that nothing falls outside your love and care, and that everything and everybody is safe in your gentle, caring hands, in this world and the next.