

It goes without saying that these are unprecedented times (in fact the number of times I've heard the word unprecedented is unprecedented). Right now many of us are left floundering to make sense of this pandemic and its aftermath. Most of us living in Britain today have until 2020 never seen anything like it, there have been no plagues in my lifetime, no need to stop hugging the people that I love, no horrifying statistics of death. And then came COVID 19, having a dramatic effect on the whole country and particularly those working in health and care. We can however comfort ourselves that humans have been here before. Plagues, famines, wars and natural disaster have been the lot of human beings for millennia.

Sometime around 100,000 years ago people just like us evolved in East Africa and began to wander, over time they settled all over the world. And wherever they wandered they wondered. And from their wondering they began to seek to understand. The big questions that we ask must have taxed their minds; why are we here? What happens when we die? Why are there random disasters that befall us? We do not necessarily know what they concluded but they left behind monuments to their questions. We have very few remains of the homes these people lived in but we do have their monuments. Edifices and temples, ziggurats and pyramids. From the strange rocks of Stonehenge to the towers in the Mexican jungle, from temples by the Ganges to Durham Cathedral these remarkable edifices speak to us of the urge to wonder that has gripped humans down the centuries. The worship of Gods, ideas or ancestors seems to be as natural to humans as living in families. People, wherever they were seemed to have an urge to use scarce resources on their spiritual quest.

Of course this urge had its downside; sometimes when disaster struck there seems to have been human sacrifice, the glorification of war and conquest and the belief that one tribe or nation was more especially favoured than others. The architectural splendour that emerged speak both of a strange 'otherness' which people felt but also of something all too familiar. The temples were often dedicated to gods who were all too human, out for revenge and even quite petty.

These the way early humans thought, their needs have not gone away, they did not disappear in a puff of logic when the enlightenment arrived and will not disappear in us; we are still the same people as those who built their temples; we have the same consciousness that can terrify us. When we see natural beauty, or sit in silence think about the big questions of life we too can be overwhelmed by wonder and at the same time faced with difficulty or challenge we can become illogical. 'What did I do to deserve this?' 'Why is God punishing us, what have we done wrong?' Logically those questions make no sense. But still we bargain 'If you make this go away I will ring my mother every week.'

We begin then with a human belief in something. We must be careful here. For some this belief is in something outside which has its own purposes; classically a god but for others it is the spark inside ourselves which longs to connect and for others still it is the wonder of nature or art. Whichever this belief; it is an echo of the same urge which built those temples.

Today people feed that urge in many ways, through meditation, through walking in nature, through absorption in art. To do these things is to look after ourselves. For me the key phrase in these practices is to 'lose yourself'. In the modern world people are encouraged more to 'find themselves'. Travel half way round the world to sit in an Ashram, chase after a solar eclipse or even fly into space and experience zero gravity. All in a desperate attempt to

be fulfilled while at the same time there is an epidemic of mental ill health. Finding yourself is part of the happiness industry and notice that it all costs money.

In the spiritual exercises I'm talking about, which are all free the emphasis is in losing yourself, at the heart of prayer, aesthetic pursuits or meditation is the acknowledgement that you are not the centre of the world. And this is the hard part; you are not even the centre of your own world.

So I will end this with an exercise. Wherever you are, look around and answer these questions:

What is happening here? (The big scale, the objects and at the microscopic level)

What was here before? (In this room, in this room before you used it, before there was a room here)

What will be here? (Once you have gone, once those you know have gone, when the room falls down)