

INTRODUCTION: Experiences

What do you buy someone for a special birthday?

These days, if you love someone – and are feeling rich – you might get them an experience.

You can get all sort of things – a chance to try Falconry, or Ferrari-driving, or Fighter Pilot flying, in a simulator. All sorts.

What experience would you most like someone to buy you as a gift?

[ask congregation - discuss...]

Experience gifts can be a cookery, dining or driving thing, a spa day, hang-gliding – all sorts. You just have to buy the day, and turn up at the place the experience can be found – spa, kitchen, race track, wherever.

When I was thinking about this and reading about it I did see one company on the web offering an “Air Traffic Control Experience Day”. Just let me know when, and I’ll take the train those days ...

Anyway, the point is, a gift these days might not come in a box, but might be an experience.

1. Mountain Experience

Long ago, Peter, James and John had an experience day of another kind. Maybe it was called “mountain adventure”.

I wonder if they really wanted to go?

I can imagine Peter saying, behind Jesus' back: "Why on earth do we have to go up a mountain?"

John replied: "Err, it's a religious kind of thing, Pete."

James agreed: "Yeah – you know, we did it in school: mountains, Moses, meeting God and all that? It's kind of a ... holy place?"

Peter was unconvinced: "Aren't there any holy places nearer home, or at least involving less climbing?"

John said, "Oh, come on Peter; it could be fun."

James added, "Yes; there might even be a gift shop ..."

Turned out, there was no gift shop. But there was a gift.

2. Spiritual Experience Then

The experience they had was a gift. Hard to describe, as spiritual experiences often are. But they saw their friend, their teacher, Jesus, in a whole new light. A very bright, white one.

They knew Jesus was special, maybe a prophet, even sent by God. But they came to believe something more, that in Jesus God himself was present, walking the earth of his own creation in this man.

Partly because of this experience. It was as if who Jesus really was had been covered up, like a light being hidden behind a thick curtain. Here, on their mountain gift experience day, the curtain was pulled back briefly, and they saw. What they saw was dazzling, baffling, and then they heard too – a voice from God saying Jesus was his son, and they should listen to him. All amazing – and

actually frightening, until it all seemed to change, and Jesus told them not to fear.

3. Spiritual Experience Now

That was then. This is now. And you may be thinking people just don't have experiences like this anymore, which makes belief hard

As one of my favourite theologians, Woody Allen, said:

“If only God would give me some clear sign! Like ... making a large deposit in my name in a Swiss bank.”

But actually, ever since then, people have had spiritual experiences in which they come to see Jesus in a new light. Not necessarily exactly like this, but some *do* talk about seeing bright light. I can relate to this myself, from a time praying with friends, many years ago.

Others speak of being wrapped in a peace they didn't think was possible.

Others feel like they've been filled like a champagne glass, to overflowing, with joy.

Others feel sadness, but in a good way – as they report being sure this is the sadness of God at suffering, motivating them to do something to change things.

How does this happen?

Where can you buy these experience days?

Is there a gift shop?

4. Go searching

No, not a gift shop, but this gift does come to those ready to seek it, willing to go the experience might be found.

For some, that's part of why we belong to a church, as we believe we find God here, among other people looking for him too, in worship and in community. You have to go the places where the experience might be found.

Then we may be dissatisfied with the experience we've had; it's become a bit mundane, and we want more. Well, you could try, for example, meditative prayer. If you are free on a Monday afternoon, at 2.00 pm, from Monday week onwards we have the chance to try some new ways of praying, seeking God in stillness, silence, and through meditating on words or images, with the help of an experienced teacher of this kind of prayer.

My limited experience of this prayer has been really helpful. I have to admit it sometimes leads me not up a mountain, but into sleep! ... but that's OK, because it means I enter calm, and peace. I'm sure there is *more* for me to discover, though. I'll be getting to as many of those Mondays as I can. You have to go the places where the experience might be found.

And what of Suzannah? Maybe not quite ready for an hour of silent meditation. But today she is welcomed into the community of people looking for God, seeking that open, unclouded vision of Jesus that Peter, James and John received. She can be helped to do that first by being told the story of Jesus, and being taught to talk to God in the simplest way, maybe at bedtime. These things are not trivial, or unimportant; they are the building blocks of faith, and we often use them when we are older to find a faith that's really ours. For prayer to feel as natural as cleaning your teeth, rather than something weird or a chore, it's best to start young. So her parents' and Godparents' promises to help her do these things are really important.

And the church will try to help too. She – like other children – may find it more fun and easier to learn about faith alongside other children. We try to offer that here in Sunday School and our monthly Messy Church.

So Suzannah, like the rest of us will need to go the places where the experience of God might be found, which can include her bedside at home for prayers, and the church too. She'll need your help and our help to get these places, to have the chance to experience God herself.

CONCLUSION: You have to be there

For spiritual experience, there is no gift shop – but there really is a gift.

And that sight of God, in his perfection, his beauty, his ability to give peace and joy, that can and needs to be sought out.

We pray for Jonathan and Catherine and Suzannah's Godparents, Emma and Andrew, today, in their helping Suzannah in her seeking.

And for the rest of us, if you are not sure what you believe, or if believe in God, but would like a clearer view, how are you going to take a next step, seek out a deeper experience?