

How fast does God move? was a question asked by a Japanese theologian. A strange question for any Christian to ask let alone a theologian, for we believe God is omnipresent, in all places at all times. If he is listening to my prayer here he doesn't have to dash off to the other side of the world to listen to someone's prayer in Australia. He is in both places at the same time.

Yet *How fast does God move?* was a question the prophet Zechariah puzzled over. He wrote that God moves with the speed of a whirlwind and even faster - *his arrows shall go forth like lightning*, today he would have written that God moves with the speed of light. Kusuke Koyama disagreed. In his book, *Three-mile-an-hour God* he claims that God doesn't move with the speed of a rocket, a jet plane, or even a bicycle, he moves at a human pace - three-miles-an-hour. God walks, he doesn't run. Legs and feet, not wheels or wings or whirlwinds, are his chosen mode of locomotion. Of course, we are in the realm of poetry and the Bible, that most poetic of books, on the whole supports the Japanese scholar not the Hebrew prophet. Indeed I know of only one verse in the Bible, I'll come to it later, where God runs. In the Garden of Eden he walked with Adam in the cool of the day; Abram left his comfortable home in Ur to spend the rest of his life walking with God in the desert; when God wanted to teach the Children of Israel that man does not live by bread alone, he made them walk with him in the wilderness for forty years; and Jesus began his great movement, as we read this morning, by inviting a handful of young men to join him for a walk which was to last for the rest of their lives. Walking is a God-blessed activity.

Martin Luther King's black freedom movement began in Montgomery, Alabama, when Rosa Parkes, a black woman, refused to give up her seat on a bus to a white passenger. Her arrest triggered off a boycott of the buses. The whole black community began to walk, and walked until resistance crumbled and political emancipation was achieved. Martin Luther King's inspiration, other than Jesus, was Gandhi. On March 12th 1930, Gandhi and his followers began a 20 mile walk to the sea, there they flouted the imperial salt tax laws by making salt from sea water. It was a significant moment in the battle for Indian independence. Some have compared it to Jesus' walk to Jerusalem.

Our walking God has not planned a static existence for us. Christianity is concerned with movement - change, progress, growth. That most conservative of theologians, John Henry Newman wrote, *To live is to change and to be perfect is to have changed much*. Any adult who still thinks and believes as they thought and believed as a child has been sitting down too long and needs to get up and start walking. Nothing in nature ever stands still and the spiritual life is the same. A baby in its mother's arms is a beautiful sight, but if it was still there 20 years later it would be grotesque. Any

parent will tell you what a great moment it is when a child takes its first steps, begins to walk, its first gesture of independence. St Paul refers to babes in Christ – new Christians whom Mother Church has to coddle and cuddle and feed on warm milk, nothing too demanding or disturbing. He also tells us that we are called to maturity, called to stand on our own two feet, to get to Church under our own steam and not to rely on the cosseting of the Vicar or anyone else to maintain our Christian discipline. But if God has not planned a static existence for us neither has he planned that we should be rocketing about; steadiness not speediness is the motion God cherishes. The seed that sprouted quickly died back just as fast. We must learn to be patient with ourselves and with each other. The great missionary William Carey, a self-taught Northamptonshire working man with an extraordinary linguistic ability, was once asked by an aristocratic snob, *Were you not once a shoe-maker, Mr Carey? No sir*, he replied, *only a cobbler*. Asked the secret of his success, he replied, *I can plod. I can persevere to this I owe everything*. A plodding cobbler was his estimate of himself. God loves plodders.

There are those – each of us some of the time - whom God has to get moving; there are those - each of us some of the time - whom he has to slow down. Like Martin Luther King, Gandhi, William Carey - like Jesus - steady progress, three-miles-an-hour, is God's aim.

In the Gospels we often see Jesus walking with his disciples; sometimes by their side supporting them, answering their questions, chivvying them on, encouraging them to go the second mile; sometimes he's ahead – especially as they journey to Jerusalem and the Cross – setting them an example, filling them with awe, leading them into uncharted territory, luring them into new experiences – unbearable sorrow, unbelievable joy. We never see him behind his disciples; never driving them, never ordering them to go where he doesn't go himself. His last words to them were, *Go forth – keep walking – Go forth into all the world and I am with you until the end of time*.

God walks with us. He walks ahead of us sometimes, but he never runs out of sight. Indeed he never runs. Except once. The Prodigal had turned his face towards home - *he set out for his Father's house. But while he was still a long way off his father saw him and his heart went out to him. He ran to meet him*. And, having met and embraced him, he adjusted his steps to the weary pace of his reborn son, and they walked home side-by-side.