

Dear Friends,

Casting around for something to write about in this pastoral letter I came across one of the stranger recent news items on the BBC website: 'Greggs and Primark to launch fashion range'. Yes, really: the high priests of fast food and fast fashion are the unlikely bedfellows in a new business venture. And credit to the wag on Twitter who wrote,

"Greggs and Primark 'joining forces on a clothing collection'?
Looking forward to bake-inis, sausage rollnecks and
handbag(ueue)s."

But why this bizarre alliance? Step forward Tim Kelly, director of New Business Development at Primark, for an explanation:

"We want to give our customers incredible experiences in our stores and offer collections they can't find anywhere else, with brands we know they love."

Yes folks, you can't just 'do the shopping' anymore, you must have an *experience*.

Now forgive me as a stereotypical man for yawning at this point. For me, shopping is an operation to be planned with military precision. Prepare list. Follow it to the letter. If in supermarket, work out most efficient route up and down the aisles so there's no need to double-back and waste time. Pay. Go home. Mission accomplished. Experiences? No thank you, they'll only delay me.

If I cut the Primark man some slack, I consider why that chain and others feel they need to offer their customers an experience. Part of the reason must be the competition they face from internet shopping. They need something to distinguish themselves from the low prices, wide ranges, and fast deliveries of web companies.

The emphasis on experience was one of the great contributions of Wesleyan spirituality to wider Christianity – not so much general human experience as an experience of God. Indeed, in discerning the will of God it has (controversially) been suggested that Wesley took the Anglican Triad of Scripture, tradition, and reason and added a fourth element, experience, to form a 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral.' We see this throughout his journal entries, from his heart being strangely warmed to being in a meeting where the glory of God fell so

powerfully upon all assembled that they prostrated themselves, reciting the words of the Te Deum in praise of their Lord. We also find it in the stricken hearts of enquirers and converts, bewailing their sins as Wesley preached.

These elements are far less prevalent in our Methodist worship today. And while I would counsel against seeking experiences for their sake, the relative absence of them makes me wonder whether we are avoiding God, diluting our faith, or keeping a 'safe distance' from him.

I must examine my own spiritual life. Have I put things in the way between me and God? Have I given my affections to something else? Have I limited Christianity to being forgiven and put aside the call to be a disciple and friend of Jesus? Have I reduced the Gospel to a theory to be argued for rather than a life to be lived?

Maybe we could remember the words of James:

Come near to God, and he will come near to you. (James 4:8)

After all, our experience of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit reveals the consumer experiences we are being sold today for what they are: tired, torn, and second-hand.

Your friend and minister,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dave Faulkner". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping tail on the letter "n".

Dave Faulkner