

Monday 23rd January 2023

It was 7:15pm. The wind was picking up, the rain was falling. I sat in the drivers seat with soaking wet jeans and wished that there wasn't another 260 miles between here and Alnwick. It was going to be a long journey. The question in my head at that point being... 'was this really worth it?'

I've been thinking a lot about the theme of Journey recently. I'm sat typing this at a coffee shop in Morpeth early on a Monday morning because Jas's school bus run no longer exists and Caroline and I are taxi-ing the year 13 student for the foreseeable. There is much that I'm learning about Journey....

Ipswich Town fans based in Alnwick are few and far between. Who knew?? In fact, Dad and I account for what I believe is 50% of the Northumberland base but I could be wrong. Nevertheless, I'd been looking for an opportunity to go and watch my 'home' team this season and spotted a fixture back in November that pitted Ipswich against league leaders Plymouth Argyle on 14th January. At the time, it was a 'first against second' fixture with Plymouth topping the table and Ipswich hot on their heels. By the time the fixture came round, Plymouth were still top and Ipswich were well....stuttering.

Regardless, Dad and I were committed to go and undertake the journey in a day. 'You're nuts!' said a few locals. 'You're a proper fan' said most Ipswich supporters. Perspective eh. The slightly inconvenient fact is that Portman Road, the home of Ipswich Town is situated a mere 322 miles from Alnwick. Undeterred we set off at 05:45 on a wet Saturday morning and travelled down to first Cambridgeshire where we hooked up with my friend and fellow Town fan, Dan and then onto Ipswich. Portman Road was at capacity with just under 30,000 at the ground. We were situated near the very noisy away fans which was irritating with their constant prattle about being top of the league. However, when Ipswich scored, it was the best possible place to be as the very shouty Argyle fans suddenly were stunned into silence. The rain that had stopped came back with a vengeance during the match and I looked at my saturated jeans at one point and thought 'I don't care how wet I get if we win this'.

But, oh no, Ipswich wouldn't be Ipswich without conceding in the 93rd minute and I sat there absolutely soaked through with Argyle fans getting very noisy again. Disappointed again!

The final whistle blew and all of a sudden, the long journey home loomed into view. The first leg took us back to Cambridge and, sat side by side, Dan and I chuntered away about the 'if only' of that game, bemoaning the fact that we had – yet again – dropped points before the final whistle whilst callers to BBC Suffolk vented forth about how useless we were and all of a sudden every one on the line seemed to be a football manager who knows everything that's wrong and what's needed to put it right. Sigh.

So, back to my question: 'was it really worth it?'. Well, let's start with the journey back from Cambridgeshire. Sat side by side, Dad and I chatted away about football, family, faith and life in general with all its highs and lows and the miles clicked over smoothly until we dropped off the A1 into Alnwick at just before 11:30pm. We'd done an 18 hour day and travelled 640 miles just to watch 22 blokes kick a ball of air for 90 minutes. Or had we??

As I walked through the door, I thought about the importance of viewing the Journey as a Process rather than a Destination.

My Twitter feed was full of fans saying that their journey home was longer and harder and more frustrating because of the result. But that's now how I felt at nearly midnight after a day fully committed to and focussed on My Team. It was about the Journey of that day, not what happened in the 93rd minute of the game. Sure, I could focus on the disappointment of that and let it overwhelm me...or I could see the day as a whole and what I'd gleaned from it.

It was a day of conversation, friendship, atmosphere, highs and lows and just being Present to what the day brought.

It's something that I have to take on board when it comes to my Walking With Jesus Journey because quite honestly I'm shoddy at it right now. I'm all too easily drawn into a tailspin when life goes wrong or not how I'd like it. 'Where are you God?' I shout...feeling like I'm alone in the wilderness. In actual fact, He's right there beside me, but because I've allowed myself to put on blinkers and see only darkness and despair, my peripheral vision has been impaired and I'm not aware that the person walking adjacent to me... is still present...to me

The reality of the Discipleship Journey - as I indicated a couple of weeks back at the start of our Grow series - is that there is no 'completion certificate' because the Journey goes on for all our lives. Where and when and how you and I choose to interact with the companionship of Jesus is entirely up to us. That takes discipline and a desire to connect even - and especially - when the wind is against us and we're struggling to stand up never mind walk on. We may wonder about what we knew to be true as no longer being true and yet...and yet...what is unequivocally true is that He remains constant. We (read I) need to take the blinkers off so that we can be more aware of the 360* vista - which will include thunderstorms as well as sunsets - with a pragmatism of the bumps in the road that the Journey is and, with a growing awareness that the Person in closest proximity remains true to His Promise to always walk with us. The Journey best walked is when we fully understand that it is about 'us' not 'me'. My favourite verse from Isaiah 41 reads like this: *I've picked you. I haven't dropped you.' Don't panic. I'm with you. There's no need to fear for I'm your God. I'll give you strength. I'll help you. I'll hold you steady, keep a firm grip on you.*