

Woman in the Cloisters

The story is written to be read in the Cathedral Cloisters

Welcome to the Cathedral everyone.

Before we go to the Chapter House to see our perfectly preserved copy of Magna Carta, I'd like to tell you about something very strange that happened yesterday. I was leading the usual tour around the Cathedral building. You know the kind of thing: the early days at Old Sarum, the new Cathedral down here in the valley; the gravel foundations, and the later addition of tower and spire. I had a pleasant party of visitors: a couple from Philadelphia, a young man from Sydney, and a middle-aged woman from Caphanaum in Israel; along with the usual bunch of English visitors.

I was telling them how a relic from the Virgin Mary's tunic had been sealed in a casket beneath the old mediaeval cross, when a young lad came running through the cloisters and burst into our little group. Nice kid, I thought and wondered if his parents were in our group. He charged straight up to me and blurted out his question: 'Where's God?' Just like that. 'Where's God?'

Well, I'm used to people asking for the toilets or even the tomb of Sir John Cheney, hero of the Battle of Bosworth. But 'Where's God?' That was a new one on me. Most people don't ask after God; they seem more comfortable with tall tales from heritage and history.

I was on the point of asking if he'd tried the coffee bar, but then thought better of it. Everyone went quiet and looked at me, expecting an answer. But my mind went blank. It doesn't usually do that. Most times I have too much to say in answer to your questions. But the kid wanted a real answer and I wasn't sure that I had it.

It was then that the Israeli woman took over. She didn't speak. She simply stepped forward, put her hand on the lad's shoulder and lead him through the door onto the Green. I was relieved; I don't like looking stupid in front of the punters. Looking round, I know that you guys would feel the same. How is it that *kids* ask the toughest questions?

Anyway, back to our story. No sooner had the lad left the building, than his parents turned up. 'Excuse me,' the woman said, 'But have you seen our boy? Brown eyes, dark hair and about so high.' She marked his height with her hand. 'Would that be the lad in search of God?' I grinned. 'Yes. That would be him.' It was now her turn to smile. At that moment, the Israeli woman re-entered the Cloisters, talking with the boy. His waiting parents looked relieved but gave him a right going over going over for not saying where he was going.

Walking home, I passed the Frink sculpture of the Virgin Mary on the Green. She looked, for a moment, the spitting image of the woman from Caphanaum, and even had her smile. I realised the boy had the answer to his question.

