

7 August 2016

Unless you have been hiding under a rock for the last month, you will have heard of the augmented reality game Pokémon Go. And seen young – and not so young – people walking around like zombies, while staring intently into their phones, even more intently than we had become accustomed to people doing. As if this could be possible.

At first, I tried to ignore this phenomenon. Not only am I usually not the least bit interested in online gaming, but I have something of a natural aversion to fads and trends. But after hearing about seemingly little else for a few days, I decided to give Pokémon Go a go, just to see what it was all about. And I rapidly found myself becoming addicted to it.

Pokémon Go involves catching various Pokémon, which are essentially little cartoon monsters. Players are called Pokémon trainers. They catch Pokémon by flicking on their phone screens to shoot balls called Pokéballs at their quarry. Pokémon trainers replenish their supplies at places called Pokéstops, and they can play combat games at virtual gyms. Pokéstops and gyms tend to be located at local landmarks. St Mark's Church is a Pokéstop, so if you ever see people congregating outside playing with their phones, now you will know why.

What makes Pokémon Go so captivating is augmented reality, which means that when you look at Pokémon, Pokéstops, and gyms etc. on your phone, they are superimposed onto your physical

surroundings, which means they bring an imaginary existence and the real world together. And you can photograph these augmented reality images, and forever record your sightings of imaginary Pokémon in real places. I have seen Zubats, which are bat-like Pokémon flying around the bucket fountain in Wellington's Cuba Street. I have seen an Eevee, which is a fox-like Pokémon, sitting at a bus stop. I saw a Magikarp, which is a fish-like Pokémon, in Lambton Harbour, while I was walking from Wellington Railway Station to my place of work on Friday morning. And I don't know whether I really should be confessing this, but what I especially want to see is a pig-like Pokémon hovering over Parliament Buildings, or the Beehive. And then photograph it at its location, and post the photo on social media, along with a comment that I've just seen the ghost of Rob Muldoon.¹

Pokémon Go has prompted various reactions, and not all of them positive. Not surprisingly, there are some conspiracy theorists out there, who claim it is a tool of either the CIA or some secretive New World Order, which uses Pokémon trainers as its unwitting spies to help it monitor the world. But thankfully, such individuals are in a minority. Others are putting Pokémon Go to more positive uses. In the game, you can set lures, which attract wild Pokémon, and therefore the Pokémon trainers who are hunting them, and I have heard unconfirmed reports of churches setting lures to attract people inside.

And several days ago, I read a satirical story which reported the Church of England is attempting to attract younger people with a new version of the Bible which includes Pokémon. The story suggested that vicars across the UK had adjusted Bible readings to

include references to Pokémon, and had even erected cartoon-like cardboard cut-outs of Jesus for congregation members to catch with their mobile phones.²

I also like the way the augmented reality of Pokémon Go is a metaphor for the duality of the spiritual and physical worlds. And I would suggest that becoming comfortable with the imaginary Pokémon world can help people become comfortable with accepting the existence of a very real spiritual realm that they cannot usually directly experience.

You may have heard me speak of the concept of 'thin places'. There is a Celtic saying that heaven and earth are only three feet apart, but in the 'thin places', that distance is even smaller. A 'thin place' has been described as a place where the boundary between heaven and earth, or as I prefer to say, the boundary between the physical and spiritual realms, is especially thin. It's a place where we can sense the divine more readily.

Heaven earth met when God came in to earth in human form. Humankind was estranged from God, but we were given a way to be reconciled. And that was for God to become fully human in Jesus the Christ, experiencing the joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, and high hopes and broken dreams that are part of human life. Including death. Jesus triumphed over death and sin with his resurrection, and we can be confident that we too can share in his risen life.

Heaven and earth come close when we were received into the Church at baptism. They meet when we encounter the real

presence of the risen Christ at the Eucharist. And I like to think they also meet when we reveal the Christ in our words and our actions.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus reminds us that we should build up treasure in heaven. When we give up our earthly riches to help the poor, feed someone who is hungry, refresh someone who is thirsty, welcome a stranger, clothe someone who lacks clothing, care for someone who is sick, and visit someone who is in prison, we do this for the Christ, and we help bring about the coming of God's reign of justice and peace, and build up our treasure.

My definition of Christian ministry is revealing Christ in word in action, but for others to see Christ in us, we must see Christ in them. St. John Chrysostom has been attributed as saying, "If you do not find Christ in the beggar at the church door, neither will you find him in the chalice." If weather permits tomorrow, I will probably be trying to catch more Pokémon at lunchtime tomorrow. But when I try to ensnare those elusive creatures that have come into my world from another realm, I must try to not ignore the homeless beggar I walk past, for when I see Christ in him or her, I will see a link to another realm that is not only real, but one whose rewards are infinitely more valuable than the entire set of Pokémon.

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<http://theword.tk>

¹ Sir Robert David Muldoon (1921-1992) was Prime Minister of New Zealand 1975-1984, and had the nickname 'Piggy'.

² <http://www.thedailymash.co.uk/news/arts-entertainment/jesus-was-the-original-pokemon-claims-church-of-england-20160718110965>