

# OF THINGS NOT SEEN

How do you photograph faith? **Jim Grover's** moving record of the life of a minister over 12 months is possibly the first ever photographic study of a London priest. He talks to Mark Bentley.

All images © Jim Grover



Going to work

Opposite top **Good Friday** below **Making Christ known**

A man walks purposefully down the road, guitar in hand. He is the Reverend Kit Gunasekera, vicar of St James' church in Clapham, south London, and he is heading for work. For a year he has been shadowed by photographer Jim Grover. The resulting photographs provide a moving insight into the commitments, challenges and joys faced in the every day life of a priest.

It's a job unlike any others. 'I remember the second time I spent time with him,' says Jim. 'I come from a corporate background and I wondered how does the Church of England appraise the performance of a minister? So I said: "Kit, who are you accountable to?" He said: 'Jim, I'm

*'I thought: wow – I'm in a different world here.'*

accountable to God." And I thought: wow – I'm in a different world here.' I meet Jim as he prepares for an exhibition of the pictures at the Oxo Gallery in London. Likeable and articulate, he is a successful businessman as well as a photographer and has had his pictures published in the *Guardian*, *Times* and *Telegraph*. He explains how he had wanted to do a local project and thought about photographing people at the barber's or at a food bank before he had the idea of telling the story of a London priest over 12 months.

So, one Friday afternoon, he popped into the local church and suggested the idea to Kit, who he had met only once before.

Kit asked for time to think about it and came back later to say yes. It was the beginning of a photography project that has become a fascinating study of a man of faith and the community he serves. Kit extends an astonishing level of trust to Jim, allowing access to behind the scenes preparations, church services, visits to the sick, regular meetings and even his prayer journal.

'From the outset, you would have thought that we would have a long conversation about ground rules,' says Jim. 'Actually, we didn't spend long on that. I said to him: "Any time you want me to leave, or put the camera >





School visit



Opposite top Street ministry below Wrestling with the Church's issues

◀ down, just say so and I will do it without any explanation. Secondly, when it comes to finally producing the images, you will have right of veto. If there's anything you don't feel comfortable with, it will not be in there."

In the end, there were only two occasions when Jim didn't photograph: once when someone on the tube objected and once when a parishioner was weeping and Jim chose not to intrude. The pictures that Jim did take were rarely shown to Kit. 'I showed him the first two or three and I showed him no more. Occasionally I would share things with him, but he would never ask to see them.'

Taking his inspiration from W Eugene Smith's 1948 photo-essay *Country Doctor*, Jim wanted to create an authentic portrayal of Kit's ministry. Using a Leica M Monochrom and a 35mm

*'At that point I looked at what had won the year before, and I thought I've got no chance!'*

lens, he shot 15,000 images over 93 days throughout the year. He had to fit the project around his business commitments, so sometimes he could only grab an hour with Kit, while at other times they would spend much of the working day together.

Jim also spent time building up trust with the congregation. He got to know people, was sensitive about when he chose to use the camera and became the church photographer, taking pictures for events and the church website. He even provided disposable cameras so people could record their own lives – and some of these pictures are displayed at the exhibition.

Did he know what he was looking for when he started the project? 'People kept saying to me: 'What's the story?' I kept saying: 'I don't know yet.' Early on, all I could see were this guy's challenges. If you are a south London priest, ministering to 50 people, the church is losing money – it's challenging. So I thought the theme here is battle. But actually as I moved on I thought there was so much else – community, faith, caring for each other, generosity. So I let the story just evolve.'

By letting the story evolve, Jim realised the Sunday service was just a small part of Kit's week. There were visits to the sick, quiz nights and committee meetings, teaching, listening, keeping a close eye on the church budget, wrestling with moral questions and connecting with a diverse congregation that ranges in age from a six month old to people in their 90s. >





Service



With Floris



Young at heart



Together in Christ



**Easter Sunday communion – the other side of the window**

< Many of the pictures were taken outside the church's walls, reflecting Kit's work in the wider community. One of those photographs, *With Floris*, was entered in the Faith Through a Lens competition, which featured a panel of judges led by legendary war photographer Don McCullin. The competition encourages people to engage with the subject of faith through photography and when Jim heard his picture was in the final 10 he was delighted. 'At that point I looked at what had won the year before, and I thought I've got no chance! All the pictures were of faith as a happy, energy-giving thing. Mine is a pretty serious subject. It's an intense moment.'

But to Jim's surprise, he did win and it was

at the awards ceremony that he finally realised what his photographic story was all about. One of the judges quoted from Hebrews 11:1: 'Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.' That phrase – *of things not seen* – encapsulated everything and became the title of the project. It's a description of what faith is all about and it's an exploration of all the things you *don't* usually see when faith is put into action.

Looking back, Jim is full of praise for Kit and the congregation for their support. 'I think it was amazing that he was so willing to do this,' he says. 'He's a generous, lovely man.' The experience also had a profound effect upon Jim, who has reconnected with his own faith and joined the church.

What were the rewards of the project? 'Firstly, I got to know someone who I really enjoy spending time with. He's a friend. He inspires me. He's my priest – that was a completely unexpected, unintended outcome. Secondly, I have got to know a whole bunch of people I wouldn't usually have met. Thirdly, I have gained an appreciation of what it's like to do a photo essay – and it's bloody hard! My admiration for Eugene Smith and Chris Killip is greater because I now know how hard it is to create a coherent story with strong images all the way through. That is really hard – if not impossible! Hard, but not impossible. You need to be creative and to work hard, to respect others and learn from those who've gone before you. And you need faith.'

OF THINGS NOT SEEN: A YEAR IN THE LIFE OF A LONDON PRIEST

is at the Oxo Gallery on the South Bank, London, until 20 March.

ofthingsnotseen.com