

Reading and Sermon for the 2nd Sunday Before Lent

12th February 2012

Readings

Deut 18:15-20

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. This is what you requested of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: 'If I hear the voice of the Lord my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die.' Then the Lord replied to me: 'They are right in what they have said. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die.'

Colossians 1.15-20

15 Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; 16 for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all

things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

John 1.1-14

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. 4 What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. 6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. 14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Revd Dr. Anna Wallis – Morning Eucharist

Two stories concerning atheists have captured my attention this week. The first, I saw on Facebook and involved Rebecca Nye who many of you will remember from St Peter's choir – if you don't know her by name you will probably remember her dreadlocks!

Rebecca, who is now singing at Leeds RC cathedral, tripped over her cassock at the beginning of Mass and broke her foot! Afterward, she joked that it was probably divine retribution for her lack of faith. Some may think Rebecca's position hypocritical, but as my friend and someone with whom I have great debates, I would beg to differ.

Brought up as a churchgoer, Rebecca has thought deeply about matters of faith and finds herself currently unable to believe in a loving God, for a variety of well-thought-out reasons. However, she is always willing to enter debate with those who have wrestled with similar questions and come down on the other side of the argument. She has not simply dismissed faith out of hand and for that she has my absolute respect.

The second story left me deeply troubled, although not entirely surprised: on Friday Mr Justice Ouseley ruled that Bideford council could not legally hold prayers during council meetings. As I searched for the source of my disquiet, I realised that it was not so much the marginalisation of Christianity from public life which bothered me - important as that issue is;

What infuriated me was the certainty with which members of the National Secular Society proclaim the fallacy and stupidity of religious belief; a

conviction which drives their crusade to secularise society. I wonder what it is that makes Clive Bone – the councillor who brought the case – so embarrassed and uncomfortable about other people's prayers? Sadly, we are unlikely to find out.

In the process of preparing this sermon I came across the book 'God in the Bath'. It's nice and short, only 95 pages, and a light read – not bad for a theology book. In it author Stephen Mitchell writes:

'We can imagine faith.... running from the study, having been overwhelmed and shouted down by science and technology. Once heralded as Queen of the Sciences, faith struggles to hold her own. Her boast to change the world is ridiculed by industrial and technological revolutions. Faith's miracles are childish conjuring tricks compared with the awesome powers of the atom and mirco chip.

Who needs to turn water into wine when the supermarket shelves are stacked high with vintages from around the world? Where's the buzz in praying when there's a constant, comforting communication of text messages and e-mails? What has faith to say to a world whose increasing knowledge threatens gridlock on the information superhighway?'

Of course one of the most contentious areas of faith for secularists is creation. What does it mean to believe in God as creator?

You're probably ahead of me here – this is where today's gospel reading comes in.

John's gospel echoes the first words of the Bible: 'In the beginning'. But whereas Genesis says, 'in the beginning God made heaven and earth...' John says, 'In the beginning was the Word.' In this passage the first point John is making is that God doesn't create in the same way that human beings create. Creation is not the result of a divine DIY project.

God speaks or thinks and it happens. Except that God does not speak or think in the way that we do. So, believing in God the creator, 'maker of heaven and earth', means that we believe in a God who creates without material and by a process which we cannot understand but a process for which speaking or thinking are good analogies.ⁱⁱ

John is sharing the new insight that it was the *logos*, the word or reason or logic of God that caused creation to be. 'God' is what makes things 'be'.

God is not another 'thing', but 'thingness itself',
God is not a being, but 'beingness-itself',
God is not alive, but 'life itself',
God is not real, but 'reality itself'.

So our relationship with God is our relationship to reality and life.

God is the great mystery at the heart of life. How do we engage with that mystery? Paul suggests we must look at the life and person of Jesus. For in him all things hold together and in him we see the fullness of God.

The gospel of John thus continues the process of revelation, a process in which our vision of God has developed considerably:

From one god among many to the one and only God;

From a god of wrath and vengeance - to the God of love and mercy;

From an unapproachable god - to the God who dwells in people's hearts.ⁱⁱⁱ

I would argue that revelation did not stop with the closing of the canon of scripture – we are all called to new insights about God just much as John and Paul and every Christian in every age. If our understanding of God has developed, it should be no surprise that our understanding of nature and its origins, has also developed.

But not everyone shares that opinion. The rise of science has been paralleled by the rise of atheism. Atheists, consider creation to have no cause, believing that this to be a more intelligent, rational and scientific approach. But, observing creation cannot prove or disprove the existence of God; to think that it can is to make a category error.

Atheists believe that the Big Bang and the Universe tell us all we need to know about the origins of creation – and so it does if the question is how did the universe begin? But those who believe in God are not satisfied with that, they are searching for meaning – they are asking why did the universe begin? This is not a valid scientific question and we should not expect the scientific method to answer it. But it is a philosophical and theological question, often asked by people of faith.

This does not mean that believers have a archaic mind-set incapable of rational thought, or need an 'invisible friend'; to help them deal with the

harsh realities of life; rather, we have a more nuanced theology than the atheists generally bother to engage with. The advance of science does not render God out-dated or antiquated as Clive Bone claims.

However the advance of science and technology can increase human pride and arrogance, and it is these by-products that make it very difficult for human beings to understand a) what the word 'God' means to people who use it seriously and b) what it might mean to be a 'person of faith.'

If we want to draw science and theology together, and I would suggest that the prologue of St John's gospel with its vision of creation being driven by the logic, is a mandate for exactly that; it is a starting point for exploring how science and theology can grow together.

For me that means that I should test my beliefs in the same way as I test scientist theories; Of course I can't test God because, as I have already said, God is not a thing that can be tested, but 'thingness itself'

But I do believe that ideas we have about faith might be disproved by experience or improved by deeper reflection. Jesus called his friends and followers *disciples*, which means learners or apprentices. He calls us to be to be life long learners in our faith.

A few years ago the National Secular Society ran an advert on the side of buses 'There probably is no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life' Apparently, Richard Dawkins was against the use of the word 'probably'. But thankfully they included it. It is a word that we too should be prepared to use when we speak of God in public.

Of course it wouldn't work in church worship or private devotion. For example, a marriage service with the vows: 'I Charlie take you Lola probably to love and possibly to cherish, and perhaps till death us do part' would probably not prove the best foundation for a life-long commitment! The practice of faith, the reality of love, is not based on probabilities.

But to be taken seriously in the world today we need to be able to entertain the possibility that what we hold as a certainty is, in fact, a probability, our best hypothesis. This is not because we don't really believe it, but because we can't otherwise communicate with anyone who holds contrary certainties. I have found that such encounters with those of radically different belief has strengthened my faith, and changed it for the better.

Believing in God is not like believing in unicorns, it isn't about believing in the existence of something or someone, but rather it is about how we live now. Of course, we believe in Jesus, but we must look at the life and person of Jesus and allow his life to inform the way we live now. To 'be' is to exist, to live, to have a presence in reality. In Old English, 'leif' means loving gladly and willingly:

'So belief means you will to give all your attention to living with loving gladness in the world you think really does exist'.

To believe in God is to live gladly and lovingly in the ever-present reality of the mystery of life. The mystery of the God who was the first Word, who became the Word became flesh and who will yet have the last word.

Amen

ⁱ 'God in the Bath' by Stephen Mitchell, O Books, 2006

ⁱⁱ Some ideas in this sermon are based on a sermon by The Revd Canon Dr Stephen Cherry.

ⁱⁱⁱ F. Russell Stannard in *Theology and Science in God, Science and Humility*