

Christmas 2009

Gods can be remote beings. For Romans and Greeks in the time of Jesus they had to be placated, offerings made; they were unpredictable, capricious, vengeful, amoral. Even the picture of God in the OT had some of those qualities. At the very least he was fearful. Immeasurably above, as it were: as God said to Job when he complains. **“Where were you when I laid out the foundations of the earth? Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades, or loose the chords of Orion?”** Even a personal encounter with God wasn't exactly comforting, as Isaiah reported, **“I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple....Seraphs were in attendance above him....and one called to another, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts; the whole earth is filled with his glory.”** He was certainly fearful, and sometimes vengeful.

The image of God changes of course, as you read through the Bible. The idea of God, as one of many, in Genesis or the God of battles in Joshua, Judges and Samuel, was slowly modified. The prophets had a lot to do with that. God was now “someone”, and someone very concerned with how we behave as individuals. He was a moral God, but always remote. Then something happened; something that changed everything. A baby in an ox's stall! It's the reason why we are all here today. Jesus came.

What God did was not a complete surprise, wise heads in the past has begun to put things together. One day God would make a bold move, he would intervene. You know the hints of course, the famous verses in Isaiah, **“For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given and the government shall be upon his shoulder: his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.”** One day God would send someone to be their Saviour, just as he had done before. Moses, when they were slaves in Egypt, and David, when they were oppressed by the nations around them. Indeed it would be from David's family, the line God said would

never fail, that the new Saviour would come. **“A shoot from the stump of Jesse.”** I suppose based on that idea, the prophet Micah went further and said the Saviour would be born in David’s own town of Bethlehem. Though it was only tiny he said, **“from you shall come forth one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from old, from ancient days.”** For us and for Jesus, the most profound thoughts on who this person, this Messiah would be, come in the second part of the Book of Isaiah, we don’t know who this writer was, but for him the Messiah would be like the sacrificial lamb who takes away the peoples’ sin. The famous servant songs, **“But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities, upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.”** It is the shadow of the cross. This was the Messiah as Jesus was to understand him, but I think the people of the time were looking for the sort of Messiah foretold in Daniel’s vision of heaven, **“Then I saw one who looked like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven... to him was given dominion and glory and kingship, and all nations would serve him.”** Ah, those would be the days! Dominion and power over all the earth, with the chosen people in the vanguard.

It wasn’t going to be quite like that though. Power and dominion belong with earthy powers, with palaces; with Rome. God does not work like that and Jesus rejected such ideas at the beginning of his ministry. The day Ghandi arrived in India on a ship from S. Africa, the new Governor General of Bengal also arrived on the same ship, to a splendid welcome, bands, a parade. There were speeches and an inspection, and a carriage ride through the streets to Government House. No body noticed the little Indian man in his dark suit as he slipped quietly away. Who was it however who was destined to change the course of empire and India? Certainly not the Governor, for all his pomp. And so it was on the first Christmas. No body was looking at Bethlehem, scruffy little town, though bursting at the seams like everywhere else, because of the census. **“A decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled.”** Now there’s power and dominion for you!

The great ones of the earth were going about their business quite oblivious of the greatest of God's interventions in the history of the world.

“And is it true? And is it true?
that most tremendous tale of all
seen in a stained glass window's hue
A baby in an ox's stall?
The maker of the stars and sea
Become on earth a child for me?”

Nothing can with this truth compare - that God was born in Palestine, and lives today in bread and wine” Betjeman of course.

I suppose God could have done it differently, he could have come in the clouds of heaven with a flash of light and a trumpet blast that would have echoed around the world. He could have imposed his might and authority with shining angel hosts, for want of better imagery. He could have done that; but then he would still be the remote distant God and we his humble slaves bound to his will, and subject with no choice, to all that dominion. It simply would not have done what God intended. God was no longer to be the remote creator, “the ground of our being” as the German theologian Paul Tillich, put it. He really was going to take all the barriers away, and that could only be done by becoming one of us. A baby in an ox's stall. For the same reason it could not have been in a palace in an ivory cradle. It had to be just an ordinary person subject to all the best and the worst the world can throw at us. It had to be with our simple, rather inconvenient body, subject to heat and cold, hunger, loneliness, and weariness..... He was to take our humanity and infuse it with his divine light and purpose. So our humanity then becomes the very thing that enables us to know God as a friend and brother and teacher and healer; and him to know us with all the trials we face on our little planet spinning through space. A baby in an ox's stall. Jesus has made God known to us.

Which brings us to the greatest lines of theology in the world, from the gospel we heard this morning. It is God's gift to us on Christmas Day, **"And to all who received him who believed in his name he gave power to become children of God.**