

God works in mysterious ways

11 December 2022

Isaiah 35.1-10

Advent Sunday

James 5.7-10

Rev. Alan Keeler

Matthew 11.2-11

Many ways to faith

This season of Advent is about preparation. Immediately in front of us there is Christmas. But in the long term it is about the completion of God's purposes. Either way you look at it, it is about a journey. Advent is a particular journey in our worship but our lives a journey into God.

This journey has many shapes about it. It may be for some people it began with infant baptism, steady pattern of church attendance with Sunday school, owning one's own faith with a celebration of confirmation and progressing through the years knowing of God's presence. It may be for some this sense of tranquil progress and assurance of God's provision is just second nature.

My guess is that even if that is the shape for most people there have been many bumps along the road. There have been crises that make us doubt God or questions about what we've been told and we've wrestled with our own point of view.

There may be other people for whom faith and church and God were just not present until a sudden conversion took place. A friend of mine said it was a bit like the Wizard of Oz. One moment the film is in black and white and the next it is in colour. It sounds a bit like the conversion of Paul. However becoming a Christian later in life might still be something of a process. Curiosity is awakened, questions are asked and anxious decisions are made.

Or maybe becoming a Christian have been a rather more complex and difficult event. I always like that description C S Lewis gives of his conversion 'In the Trinity term of 1929 I gave in and admitted that God was God perhaps the most dejected and reluctant convert in England'.

Maybe all of the above is still too clear cut for some folk. There is appreciation of a building, the enjoyment of a circle of friends, activities that have routine and a fruitfulness about them. But as for speaking about one's faith in this very disbelieving generation, it seems better to let other people do the theological stuff.

I'm sure that all of these ways of journeying as a Christian and more are experiences that God is prepared to honour. But from the most comfortable to the most certain to the most vague one thing has to remain there is going to be mystery about knowing God.

John's puzzle

In our New Testament reading we met John the Baptist. Jesus can speak of John in a very high way. Jesus had said 'Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist' (Matt 11.11). High praise indeed. And yet in our Gospel reading today the great John the Baptist is very puzzled by Jesus. Jesus is a mystery who is not doing what John thinks should take place.

In fact during his ministry Jesus seemed to be happy not to tell people clear answers. He told parables that could be cryptic. When asked if he was the Messiah he didn't want to give a plain reply.

These examples should lead us to a sense of humility in what we have understood so far. Indeed an understanding of God is going to be about, in the words of the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy 'life the universe and everything'. With such a huge canvas God is going to be more than human thought can understand. The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy was written by Douglas Adams, a friend of Richard Dawkins the renowned atheist. Douglas Adams book ends with the sum 6 times 8 being 42. It should of course be 48 so the point being there is no meaning to 'life the universe and everything'.

But everybody has their meaning. I'm sure Douglas Adams was very pleased to have written a best seller. Richard Dawkins is very pleased to be able to describe evolution and say it makes sense.

I would say people of faith do not want to give up on a search for meaning even if there will be mystery to be found. Nor do people of faith want to settle for a tidy small meaning which may be true but leaves big questions unanswered.

A preacher's humility

So here I am in Advent with the task of preaching about journey and preparation with the task of giving some clarity. But on the other hand there is more involved than can be expressed and each person's situation demands its own answers.

I think there is a sermon to be delivered that is honest about the unknown, a sense of mystery and being prepared to be silent. I can remember when considering the task of preaching someone saying 'tell me your certainties, I have enough doubts of my own'. But maybe there are certainties there are two tidy and it is more about the preacher not wanting to look like they're not up to the job.

It can be that there is too much certainty. But perhaps on the other hand there can be a rather lazy attitude that puts too much on mystery.

The 18th century saw the rise of, at least, an agnostic view towards religion. Philosophers wanted explanations that were not bound to the ideas of the church. Practical people wanted to investigate the world and base descriptions on what can be tested. Together they developed the scientific method.

One of the responses of people of faith most to say much had been discovered through science but what remained unknown was in the realm of God. This was famously known as the 'God of the gaps'. The problem was as scientific knowledge advanced the gaps got smaller and smaller until they didn't exist. The sort of mystery that people of faith appealed to was perceived as just wishful thinking.

Agnostics humility

But if the believer has to pay attention to the right sort of humility perhaps the agnostic needs to as well. There are many religious myths that need to be cast aside. But there are many dimensions of being alive that cannot be brought under the investigation of science.

Some of the questions might be 'how can I get past being lonely and find good friendship?' 'How do we make a society where people are not hungry?' 'Can we form an international order with very different sorts of nations and put an end to war?' 'Should all human beings irrespective of gender, race, sexuality and more, be afforded equal respect?' To be put bluntly how do we live well as human beings.

C S Lewis again, he wrote a book with a very provocative title called 'The abolition of man'. His point is that all of the focus on the material and the investigation of facts has not helped us value human life, answer questions about our flourishing as people and even address our survival as a species. My apologies for his title,

Lewis was a person of his age but may I humbly suggest it might in these days be called 'The abolition of humanity'.

The real mystery

Put like this the issues of faith have never first of all been about how the world has been made or how we understand such things as the movement of the planets or the development of life. Faith is about very human questions to do with the cruelty of empires, the use of rules and laws and how they fall short, how to recover from a life lived badly.

I would say the believer and the agnostic are still asking these questions. The issues of our day are huge. They range from the use of fossil fuels that power our economy and are seriously damaging the world we live in. The reality of an armaments industry that floods the world with destructive power. Politicians that act recklessly to court the electorate but tank the economy. And as ever war.

John the Baptist sees real mystery in what Jesus is doing. Jesus says he is giving sight to the blind, enabling the lame to walk, healing lepers along with many other things. This because Jesus can see in each person he meets, true value and a person loved by God. Jesus has many wise things to say but he's not left with an abstract message and allowing the details to sort themselves out. He is moved, he reaches out and transforms people. And most scandalously it is anybody. Jesus does not have his favourites who are popular gifted or wealthy. In is in the midst of the people who ever they are.

John the Baptist encounters Jesus Christ and in doing so the divine. Our journey of faith is about seeing Jesus' point of view which is both about who God is and who humans are. To do both of these things is to meet mystery. There will be times when we are baffled, humbled and confused. But when we stay with Jesus' point of view we are given a way forward. It is not suddenly to understand it all but it is to be given wisdom for the next step, hope when so much seems against us and the presence of someone who will always remain faithful. The true mystery is to encounter each person well, our neighbour and our God. As we travel with Jesus it is not only possible but abundant life.