

Lent Talk 2008 – 2 ‘Who do you think you are?’

Let's start by thinking about cats and cows - the way they stare straight at you. What might they be saying by that stare - Who do you think you are? I've made my life's work an attempt to get myself and others thinking about God, and what God means for our existence, because of the the effect of the story of Jesus of Nazareth on me. I have sought to express this commitment by serving as a priest of the church. Belonging to the church has always meant for me being a member of a community in search of truth, in order to love the truth and do the truth. And, being willing to stand up and be counted for my convictions. While I am an ambassador for religion, I am also husband, father, grandfather, friend and citizen, influenced by many different kinds of experience and relationships, as we all are.

One thing that's important among the influences on me is the fact that I was raised on scientific enquiry in an industrial setting. I was never taken with the idea that all of the Bible is literally true. It never seemed that simple to me, and the idea that science either discredited religion or disposed of the need to believe in God also seemed too simplistic to be able to nourish my sense of awe and wonder in the discovery of our planet, the universe and ourselves as conscious human beings - part of the whole.

The more I learned about nature, the more I learned about society, culture, language and ideas, the more it seemed vital to explore, to probe deeper into the layers of truth comprising every aspect of life, every concern, every issue we have.

Much religion around me as I grew up argued about needing definitive truth, certainties to live by in the form of dogma, catechism – set questions and set answers encompassing all the essentials you needed to know about God, man, the church, how to behave, how to pray, in greater or less detail, depending on your denomination. Who you are was meant to be shaped by this. Yet for me this failed to embrace the bigger picture – meaning, life the universe and everything.

Dogma, catechism are strong word portraits of essential parts of the mystery,

but in the end they are only one kind of portrayal of that rich multi-layered, multi textured thing which truth is explored fully. Definitive statements are useful as markers, position points, but poetic descriptions, stories, lyrics, sagas, offer many more portraits of truth in its richness at the same time. I was glad to discover the Bible as an encyclopedia of different ways of telling truth, awakening minds to truth. It cannot be done justice if all is treated as if was the same kind of literature, word for word, exactly true.

Within the Bible are edicts, codified statements laying out teachings and interpretations, but lots more. They are not necessarily the Bible's most important means of delivering truth to its readers and hearers. Prescriptive statements are carried within, to be understood from within stories told.

We think of the Bible as the definitive collection of God's stories. But the more we are exposed to the rest of the world's religious literature the more we must admit that the Bible is not an exclusive, exhaustive collection of God's stories. Truth will out. It's clear that all sacred literature contains stories and sayings of depth and spiritual influence. They rely upon the teller and the listener bringing to the exercise of communication many and varied experiences and insights to help their understanding of the message conveyed.

I would say there is a definite character to the Bible, however. Definitive in that its very diversity of expression, and the wealth of methods which Jews Christians and others have devised for understanding it, set the tone, set a standard for enquiring into every kind of sacred text, to uncover its truth. It challenges the reader to engage with it and be changed by studying and reflecting upon it, and it has done so with unique impact on how we think. Truth embraces us, not we the truth, in this path of discovery. This is so different from saying : '*We're right and they're wrong*. Given the potential in such diverse sacred reading for misinterpretation and misunderstanding, it's remarkable how much shared understanding is achievable even among those whose way of interpreting seem totally opposed. Once we engage with sacred texts, they never cease to yeild new meanings and insights. They are a starting point for sharing an experience of God, using reason, observation,

insight, feelings, to find a way of life, of action, centred on faith - understood as open, unconditional trust.

I'm not sure I ever thought the Bible had all the right answers to questions of life. Yet to search for answers without recourse to the Bible is like looking in the dark. It is to be relied on along with experience, common sense and our training to read and discern the truth of any situation we meet. The Bible has a way of probing and challenging our own ideals, as well as shedding fresh light on life.

Having said that, however,, there are areas of human experience which just weren't there when the Bible was written, and this is where we are challenged to think creatively, constructively in response to problems we face.

People have theorised about the origin of life, the universe and everything since ancient times. Astronomical science and technology have progressed in leaps and bounds in the 400 years since the first telescope appeared, and unseated ancient speculation that celestial bodies revolved around the earth, through pure observation. Mistakenly some thought this defied what church and Bible taught, but in the end the truth had to prevail. After all, the biblical Genesis creation stories recount two differing ideas of how everything came into being. Both were accepted. They weren't quite concerned with facts in the sky, but with God as author of existence. Nobody the argued for a definitive account of the universe to end all debate. Yet interestingly enough, both the creation stories are based on different kinds of observation and interpretation of the real world.

The first thing they have in common is the declaration that the universe didn't just happen. It didn't make itself, but originated in an uncreated Creator's thought and act, One beyond the grasp of the human mind, yet not remote from experience, for creation still continues to unfold. It isn't static or finished in any way.

The second thing in common is that human beings possess some of the Creator's freedom and creativity, such that humans are spoken of as being made in God's image and likeness. God is – we are privileged to be able to

recognise divine presence and activity, but also free to refuse recognition. In these stories, creation isn't a random happening, but the ordering of primordial chaos by a creative mind. And the outcome is 'very good'. Human beings are the privileged focus of divine favour and attention.

What difference does this make? Well, in these stories there is no violent act involved in bringing things into being – something quite common in other ancient religious creation stories. At the start, goodness and violence are incompatible. Yet, as we know, there's a lot of violence in the Bible. The rot sets in early in the prehistory of humankind, it seems. Violence happens when people abuse freedom and creativity, doing things their own way, not by the maker's instructions. Human beings, in these stories of origins aren't passive beneficiaries of divine favour, but are called to a living relationship with their Creator. All are meant to relate to their Maker personally. It's not an automatic, but rather a deliberate process. The story of human evolution is a story of how relatedness to God developed as humans evolved from animal to spiritual consciousness over 30 millennia. When the cat or the cow interrogates us with its gaze, we gaze back but not as equals, albeit we share much of the basic genetic code and biochemical construction with them.

The idea of descent from apes was once thought scandalous, impossible, perhaps because people needed to feel superior by looking down on the animal world. Now we can be more positive, recognise how marvellous is the creative process of nurture and adaptation to environment which has raised us to our present level of consciousness and invention, and shows no sign of stopping. We may indeed begin to wonder - what can we become ?

The basic difference between us and animals is a difference between animal and human consciousness. Our thoughts, our awareness of ourselves as creatures that come into and go out of this existence, our ability to express ourselves in language, through deliberate free actions as opposed to automatic conditioned reflex responses, makes humans distinctive.

Creation issued from God's thought, word and act. We are made in God's image. Or is it the case that humans have realised what they are. and then

projected that idea on to the void in order to populate it ? Which comes first, the chicken or the egg ? Only as the divine-human relationship evolved with consciousness has it become possible to contemplate such a question, and mutually recognise the characteristics of one in the other.

The might of science and technology has taken us beyond the limits of our imagination and speculations in probing the universe since telescopes were first invented. We have more to marvel at now than people at any other time in history. Great theories of the origins and vastness of our universe have been formulated, as have theories about the micro-cosmic world of cells, atoms and sub-atomic particles. Through the abstract language of mathematics attempts have been made to describe these different levels and scales of reality, in ways that can put theory to the test by observation. Whilst this has been done with considerable success in most areas, there are still gaps, and no grand unifying theory has yet been formulated that shows the unity between these levels. Mystery remains.

Speculation about the origins of the universe continue today as it as done since the dawn of history, nowadays expending huge amounts of research funding and intellectual effort seeking this level of truth about our existence. Yet all we can do is to observe and speculate from inside of that which we are investigating. Beyond the universe we cannot go. The source of matter and energy, time and space is beyond us, unknowable, inconceivable for finite human minds. Is all this probing of the beyond with the most costly and sophisticated resources available to man really absurd only speculation? We choose to trust in the unknowable made known, through the fact of the material world itself, once we have made the conscious choice to trust that which *is beyond us*.

When Paul the Apostle debated with the Unknown God of the Greeks with the wide and learned men of Athens at the Areopagus, he spoke of One « in whom we live, move and have our being ». This he uses to establish common points of faith with these sophisticated pagans, before moving on to introduce them to the life and work of Jesus, in whom the unknown is made known in

person, and relates to humankind. We too need to know who we are in these terms, and what we think of ourselves and our world, in order to have a sure foundation for living.

Who on earth are you then ? What do you think of life ? Are you an optimist or a pessimist ? Are you confident or anxious about the future ? Are you hopeful or despairing about the shape of things to come ? What do you make of the proposal that the world has a creator who deemed the creation to be 'very good'. Does this have any influence on how you think of yourself and your life ? If all this seems like nonsense to you, what will you put in its place in order to make sense of your life in relation to all you know and don't know of the universe. Do you say : 'I believe it all happened as a matter of luck or chance' ? Or, 'I believe it all has no ultimate meaning or purpose.' If so, what is the point of living at all ? We cannot live entirely without meaning or purpose. Being starved of it, like being deprived of food or water, will put an end to us. Can we simply enjoy everything life brings, or endure for the sake of it, without any sense of ultimate purpose to life ? There are those who have claimed this, and there will be others. What you believe about life, what thoughts and ideas you choose to live by is a matter of choice.

But, even in a world where the sovereignty of individual choice and freedom prevails strongly, we prefer like-mindedness, agreement, support for our view, rather than going it alone. For belonging is also part of the meaning seek in life. The reason to believe is hidden in the depths of our own being. In who you think you are, where you come from, and where you truly belong. This is a real challenge that face us in such a mobile world, where our lives are divided between many different times and places. Knowing one other in true depth is more difficult than ever before. We shall have to see what that means for consideration of faith in the future.