

The God of Israel

In this lecture I pursue the idea that in a secularised world the use of the Bible is problematical. To most people the Bible appears to be a book of religious realism it appears to assume everywhere that God is a real presence, that there is a supernatural dimension in human life and that miracles are to be expected as proofs and demonstrations of God's power and love.

None of these ideas are credible in today's world, and in fact none of them has any role or function in the public life of Western society. So what can Christians do or say to make some witness in such a society?

Attempts might be made to persuade the world that these ideas are true and that it should change its ways and thoughts. Indeed that seems to have been the policy of the Churches for the past two hundred years without any vestige of success; the world goes on its merry way, managing quite well without God.

Another approach may be to examine the Bible more carefully to see if it contains anything more relevant to the challenges of a Godless world.

While we say that God in Himself is unknown and unknowable.

"How long, Lord, will you hide yourself from sight?" (Psalm 89 v 46)

"As I was going round looking at the objects of your worship, I noticed among other things an altar bearing the inscription 'To an unknown God'. What you worship but do not know - this is what I now proclaim" (Acts 17 v 23)

What we say about God is what has been said to us by those who have gone before, who themselves based most of their knowledge on the Bible but there are parts of the Bible many are overlooking. First, it is clear that in the Bible the image of God is changing all the time. The Book of Joshua tells us that the Israelites were a group of warring tribes in Palestine and that they believed God was on their side:

"The Lord said to Joshua, 'Do not be afraid or discouraged, take the whole army with you and go and attack Ai. I am delivering the king of Ai into your hands, along with his people, the city and his territory. Deal with Ai and its king as you dealt with Jericho and its king, except that you may keep for yourselves the cattle and any spoil you take.'" (Joshua 8 vv 1,2)

The Book of Deuteronomy was written long after the Book of Joshua and in it we find that the Israelites believed that God was calling them to more than survival:

"When the Lord your God brings you into the land which you are about to enter to occupy it, when he drives out many nations before you - Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizites, Hivites and Jebusites, seven nations more powerful than you - and when the Lord your God delivers them into your power for you to defeat, you must exterminate them" (Deut 7 vv 1,2)

So the Israelites believed that their God had given them the right to destroy the nations around them and to take their land. Such a claim seems impossible to justify in today's world until we realise that this is one of the reasons given by religious extremists for the present policies of the State of Israel in Palestine in our own time.

As time passed and Israel began to feel secure in its borders we find a more exalted image of God

emerging. So in the Book of the Prophet Micah:

"In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house will be established higher than all other mountains, towering above other hills. Peoples will stream towards it, many nations will go saying, 'Let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of Jacob's God, that he may teach us his ways and we may walk in his paths.'" (Micah 4 vv 1 & 2).

By the time we come to the times of the New Testament Israel has suffered exile, the destruction of Jerusalem, the conquest of the Greeks and found itself under the occupation of the Roman Empire. This resulted in a new image of God. So in the First Letter of John:

"God is love; he who dwells in love is dwelling in God, and God in him. This is how love has reached its perfection among us, so that we may have confidence on the day of judgement; and this we have because we are in the world as he is. In love there is no room for fear; indeed perfect love banishes fear." (1 John 4 vv 16 7 17)

So God is thought of as one who is primarily involved with human emotions, a very personal God, all to do with inner tranquillity and good will.

These few texts are sufficient to show us that historically we have created images of God to suit our interests and needs as we go along. In that sense it may be true to say that we create God in our own image. The Bible holds that radical idea, we shall need to look at this again later on.

The Book of Dreams

The Bible is a book of dreams. Over and over again it records God speaking to his people through their dreams. In Genesis the dream of Jacob reflects the idea that the Israelites have the God-given right to possess the lands that they occupy:

"In a dream Jacob saw a ladder, which rested on the ground with its top reaching to heaven, and angels of God were going up and down on it. The Lord was standing beside him saying, 'I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. This land on which you are lying I shall give to you and your descendants'" (Genesis 28 vv 12,13)

In Judges the dream of Gideon reflects the picture of God as the champion of the Israelites in their warring adventures:

"When Gideon heard the account of the dream and its interpretation, he bowed down in worship. Then going back to the Israelite camp he said, 'Let us go! The Lord has delivered the camp of the Midianites into our hands.'" (Judges 7 v 15)

The Book of Job is quite explicit in saying that God speaks to people in their dreams, and even that nightmares have the purpose of warning them of difficulties to come:

"Indeed, once God has spoken he does not speak a second time to confirm it. In dreams, in visions of the night, when deepest slumber falls on mortals, while they are asleep in bed God imparts his message, and as a warning strikes them with terror". (Job 33 vv 14-16)

The Book of Daniel shows that even the dreams of non-believers can bring messages from God:

"Daniel answered: 'No wise man, exorcist, magician, or diviner can tell your majesty the secret about which you ask. But there is in heaven a God who reveals his secrets, and he has made known to King Nebucadnezzar what is to be at the end of this age. This is the dream and these are the visions that came into your head.'" (Daniel 2 vv 27,28)

The vision of the prophet Joel shows that even when the divine spirit falls on the human race there will still be a place for dreams:

"After this I shall pour out my spirit on all mankind; your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams and your young men will see visions;" (Joel 2 v 28)

Dreams appear in the New Testament in the most Jewish of the Gospels. Matthew says that Joseph had a message from God in a dream:

"After Herod's death an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said to him, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who threatened the child's life are dead.'" (Matthew 2 vv 19,20)

The wife of Pontius Pilate is regarded as a saint in the Orthodox Church, largely because she is reported as having a dream about Jesus, again in St Matthew's Gospel:

"While Pilate was sitting in court a message came to him from his wife: 'Have nothing to do with that innocent man; I was much troubled on his account in my dreams last night.'" (Matthew 27 v 19)

While many of us in the Christian community have no difficulty with the idea of God speaking to us in dreams, that will not do if we try to communicate with the non-believer. We can certainly concede that even the most elementary student of psychology knows that dreams are an expression of the subconscious mind ceaselessly at work sorting out the experiences of the day and relating them to archetypal images shared by the community in what Carl Jung calls the collective unconscious.

Bishop Richard Holloway provides this interesting quote from the philosopher Nietzsche:

"Misunderstanding of the dream. In the ages of crude primeval culture man believed that in dreams he got to know another real world; here is the origin of all metaphysics. Without the dream one would have found no occasion for a division of the world. The separation of body and soul, too, is related to the most ancient conception of the dream; also the assumption of a quasi-body of the soul, which is the origin of all belief in spirits and probably also of the belief in gods. 'The dead live on; for they appear to the living in dreams'; this inference went unchallenged for thousands of years."

("Doubts and Loves" by Richard Holloway, p20)

Wisdom

Whereas the place of dreams as a medium for messages from God is uniformly expressed throughout the Bible the relevance of wisdom is something, which develops and matures. It begins as an expression of practical advice on virtuous living:

"My son, attend to my wisdom and listen with care to my counsel, so that you may preserve discretion and your lips safeguard knowledge. For though the lips of an adulteress drip honey and her tongue is smoother than oil, yet in the end she is bitter as wormwood, as sharp as a two-edged sword"

(Proverbs 5 vv 1-4)

Wisdom includes the cunning insight of King Solomon as shown in his judgement in the case of the two women both claiming a new born baby:

"When Israel heard the judgement which the king had given, they all stood in awe of him; for they saw that he possessed wisdom from God for administering judgement." (1 Kings 3 v 28)

There is a hint here of the future apotheosis of the concept. These examples are subject to the fear of the Lord, the beginning of wisdom:

"The first step in wisdom is the fear of the Lord, and knowledge of the Most Holy One is understanding; for through me your rays will be increased and years added to your life."
(Proverbs 9 vv 10 -11)

The idea of wisdom as an essential part of the being of God follows in later writings:

"For wisdom is more moving than any motion: she passes and goes through all things by reason of her pureness. For she is the breath of the power of God, and a pure influence flowing from the glory of the Almighty: therefore can no defiled thing fall into her." (Wisdom 7 vv 24,25)

In the New Testament the process reaches its climax. Wisdom is incarnate in Christ, and it is also seen as the gift of the Holy Spirit:

"Jews demand signs, Greeks look for wisdom, but we proclaim Christ nailed to the cross; and though this is an offence to Jews and folly to Gentiles, yet to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, he is the power of God and the wisdom of God." (1 Corinthians 1 vv 22-24)

While these ideas may resonate with the believer they can have little significance for secularised persons. For them wisdom is a human attribute, admirable and important, but "down here" rather than "up there".

Psalm 119

Those who are familiar with the psalms from their use in public worship will know that Psalm 119 is composed of 22 sections corresponding to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, the verses of the first section begin with the letter "aleph", the second with "beth", and so on. The commentators describe the psalm as an alphabetic acrostic. It is difficult for those who, like myself, only read it in translation to appreciate the poetic beauty of the original form. Some commentators complain about the "weariness and boredom" of reading the sections of the psalm which contain so many repetitions and apparent lack of developed argument. That is to miss the point; the psalm is a meditation on the glory of the law. As with other meditations its value is in pondering upon a single idea, looking at it from different angles, becoming deeply aware of its subtleties and nuances, and spending time doing this. Consider the following verse:

"I will meditate on thy precepts; and give heed unto thy ways" (v 15)

The psalmist sees the law as an expression of the nature of God. The psalm is a presage of the Scholastic saying that the essence and attributes of God are one. In other words to the psalmist God is what he does:

"Thou art good and thou doest good: O teach me thy statutes" (v 68)

The various terms representing the law in the psalm - word, precept, statute, law etc. appear to be inseparable from the nature of God. This is a serious point. The psalm reflects the intense religious feeling of the psalmist; his feelings are focussed upon aspects of the law as upon the Lord himself:

"And my delight shall be in thy commandments: which I have loved exceedingly" (v 46)

"O let thy merciful kindness be my comfort: according to thy word unto thy servant" (v 76)

The piety of the psalmist brought him into conflict with his community and resulted in suffering on his part. There can be no doubt that he is very much a part of his community, he does not write from any ivory tower, removed from the challenges and difficulties of everyday life:

"How many are the days of thy servant: when wilt thou execute judgement on them that persecute me? The arrogant have digged out pits for me: they walk not after thy law", (v 84,85)

In this long meditation we may ask how the psalmist understands the reality of God. He uses the term "the Lord" and none other. God is not called Almighty,

Heavenly, Glorious, Merciful or any of the other titles we normally associate with the God of Israel in the Old Testament. Of course the psalm does not contain any philosophical argument, we deduce his position from an analysis of the text alone - a devotional and lyrical extended poem.

The title "the Lord" is used as a personification of the law. There are many verses in which the psalmist sees his relationship with the law in exactly the same way as his relationship with God:

"My delight shall be in thy statutes: and I will not forget thy word" (v 16)

"O teach me true understanding and knowledge: for my trust hath been in thy commandments" (v 66)

What does this psalm say to us today? It focuses our minds upon the idea that the law begins with an inner vision of how the human community ought to be, a vision of order and peace and justice. This is expressed in human society in the form of written laws, commandments, precepts and so on. The application of these things to actual situations gives rise to the challenges and failures of imperfect human beings and their systems. Nothing can be more important than the continual struggle to apply and improve our laws and rules. Religious language and ideas uphold and strengthen those involved in this struggle. To the writer of psalm 119 the glory of the law is that it has the power to restore or maintain peace and order in an imperfect world, and, it seems, this is one with his vision of God.

The God of Israel has a very bad press. To the outsider at least, and not without reason, he seems to stand for violence, vengeance, absolute power, incredible and impossible miracles. If we are to engage ourselves with people in the secularised world we need to help them to see that there are other images of the God of Israel in which we see more rational and reasonable ideas.

We need to accept that much of our thinking about God is conditioned by our particular situation and self interest, that we tend to slip into supernatural modes of thought when normal human arguments do not suit us, that we need to be prepared to enter into dialogue with the unbeliever in order to work together to make the world a better place in which to live.