

Sermon for Pentecost 2010

quoting Romans 8:14-17; John 14:8-17

When people say ‘they don’t believe in God’, sometimes it’s interesting to ask just what they mean. When those who consider themselves atheists begin to unpack the meaning they give to the word ‘God’ in the first place we might often find ourselves in agreement with them, and be able to say, “well, I don’t actually believe in that sort of God myself”. I suspect what forces some naturally sceptical people into taking an atheist position is the frightening and rather dangerous certainty that some religious people express. I don’t refer here to *inner* certainty and assurance – which I believe to be the grace and hope that God puts within us – but the sort of facile, ‘black-and-white’ language that is sometimes heard in talk about God. There are, for instance, a variety of modern worship songs available for use by churches today; we use a few of these, but other churches favour them pretty well the exclusion of more traditional hymns – it’s partly a matter of cultural choice. For myself, I approach some of these songs with a certain amount of caution as they can tend to put emotion over substance, and in their effort to be simple and direct, they come close to spreading misunderstanding and – almost - heresy. If you find yourself, when visiting another church, singing a chorus that repeats again and again, ‘Jesus is God’ as I have done, you might begin, as I did, to feel a kind of spiritual claustrophobia coming over you. I may be happy to call Jesus the Son of God; I may be willing to call him my Saviour, Redeemer and Lord, but does Jesus Christ represent *everything* there is to be said about God?

In the Hebrew scriptures that Jesus inherited there is absolute certainty that there is only one God, but there are many names given to him. At Morning Prayer recently I encountered one of these from the Book of Numbers, in which Moses addresses the Lord as ‘the God of the spirits of all flesh’ – one of many descriptive titles often given to God in the OT. One of the reasons for these many titles for God is that, in the Book of Exodus when, on Mount Sinai, Moses asks God his actual name, he reveals it to him mysteriously, as “I am what I am” – or “I will be what I will be”. The Hebrew for that name, ‘Jahweh’, is to this day held by Jews as too sacred to be spoken.

In the Gospel of John Jesus says to his disciples that he still has many things to say to them, but that they can’t ‘bear them’ now. ‘When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth’, he says. Earlier, in the passage from John set for Pentecost he says “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another

Advocate, to be with you for ever...the Spirit of Truth". Jesus is at the heart of Christian faith, but as we will celebrate on Trinity Sunday, and as we acknowledge every week in the Creed, we find we can only express the fullness of God - 'He who is' - as Creator, as the Bearer of our pain, and the Energiser of our life with Him, in terms of three distinct Persons of that one God: the Holy Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

I make this point because talk about the Holy Spirit, which is the gift to the church we celebrate at Pentecost, too easily becomes either centred on certain sensational gifts, or on the other hand gets marginalised into a dull academic discussion. But this Spirit, or 'breath' of God is the same Spirit which in Genesis is described, at Creation, as 'moving over the face of the earth'. As human-beings made in the image of God we all carry the imprint of his creativity and imagination because God, as the OT says, is 'the God of the spirits of all flesh'. This immediately gives us common ground with all our fellow human beings, and is something we should celebrate.

Of course we must make a further distinction between the general glimpses we can all share of the Holy Spirit as human beings, and the special gift of that Spirit we have as Christians, as described by Paul in his letter to the Romans – whereby we are adopted as 'children of God' and 'heirs of Christ' and are 'led by the Spirit'. But we need to open our minds and hearts to just on how broad a canvas the Spirit can operate, to dare to imagine more connections arising from that, and to allow ourselves to be led more creatively by that same Spirit, into ever new paths. The 'Spirit of Truth' isn't merely some kind of 'thought police' which steps in to halt us when we start believing or doing the 'wrong thing' – it is to lead us into our true potential in Christ; into decisions of true courage, and into lives of true integrity. As Paul's letter indicates, it leads us to 'suffer with' Christ, so that we may also be 'glorified with him'. Perhaps our real challenge this Pentecost is to really believe Jesus' words in John's Gospel, that in the power of the Spirit, *'the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these'*.

Paul Nicholson