

CITY CHURCH, CARDIFF:

MOTHERING SUNDAY, 22ND MARCH 2009

GATHERING SONG AND THE BIBLE IS BROUGHT IN
NOTICES

CALL TO WORSHIP

Be still and know that I am God, and there is none beside me

Be still and know that I am God, and there is none beside me (2x)

PRAYER OF APPROACH

God says: 'As a mother comforts her son

so shall I myself comfort you.'

Honour your father with all your heart

and do not forget your mother's birth-pangs.

Remember that your parents brought you into the world;

how can you repay them for all that they have done?

Seeing his mother, with the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, Jesus said to her, '*Mother, there is your son*'; and to the disciple, '*There is your mother*'; and from that moment the disciple took her into his home.

HYMN 378: *Awake my soul and with the sun*

PRAYERS OF ACKNOWLEDGEMENT, RECONCILIATION AND RENEWAL

God, Our Loving Mother and Father,

You who are the Almighty and the All-Compassionate,

You eternally share your life and your love with us.

Help us to respect you, to hallow your name, to learn how to thank you:

to respond to your guiding finger, your shaping hands

and your strengthening arms.

We revere you who measures the universe in the palm of your hand,

and feeds and carries and leads your people like a Good Shepherd.

Our Father and Mother, may we hallow your name today and always. Amen

2.

WE LISTEN TO GOD'S WORD

FAMILY TIME: God as Shepherd, Woman, Father

Stories (parables) known as

The Lost Sheep; The Lost Coin; The Lost Son Good News Bible

Parables about the lost, sheep, coin and son New RSV

Jesus speaks of the love of God for "the lost" J B Phillips

Jesus shows us what God is like

What title would you give this story?

Brother 1: dissolute, spendthrift, reckless, inconsiderate;

Brother 2: mean-spirited, unloving, jealous, vindictive

Father wants them to accept each other and live as brothers

The generous loving Father

These are stories to be acted and put in modern terms

What about the two sisters and the generous mother?

Is God both a generous mother and father? A Loving Parent.

READING 1: Luke 15. 1-10

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, 'This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.'

So he told them this parable: 'Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbours, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.'

The Parable of the Lost Coin

'Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbours, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin

that I had lost.” Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.’

READING 2: Luke 15. 11-32

THE PARABLE OF THE GRACIOUS FATHER

But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. Then the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly, bring out a robe - the best one - and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found'. And they began to celebrate.

3.

"Now his elder son was in the field; and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. He called one of the slaves and asked what was going on. He replied, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf because he has got him back safe and sound.'

Then he became angry and refused to go in. His father came out and began to plead with him. But he answered his father, 'Listen! For all these years I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fatted calf for him!'

Then the father said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.'"

PRAYER

*Our Father in Heaven,
we come to lift up our hearts to you,
to offer thanksgiving for your great love towards us.
'He looks for the one who was lost until he finds it. When he finds it, he is so happy that
he puts it on his shoulders and carries it back home.'
We know only too well that we are like lost sheep,
a lost coin
a lost child.
We have erred and strayed from your ways
and we do not know the way back.
Good and Loving Lord, help us.
You are the Good Shepherd;
the Caring Woman;*

the Loving Father who rejoices when the child returns.

HYMN 105: *The great love of God* D.T.Niles (1908-70)

PRAYER

Lord to whom shall we go; yours are the words of eternal life.

SERMON

HYMN: 610: Beloved, let us love

MUSICAL REFLECTION

4.

WE RESPOND IN FAITH AND ACTION

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

THE OFFERING OF OUR GIFTS

HYMN 646: Help us accept each other as Christ accepted us;

DISMISSAL AND BLESSING

RECESSIONAL

1.

SERMON

INTRODUCTION

1. RETIREMENT AND TIME FOR FAMILY AND FRIENDS.

One of the joys of retirement is having more time for family and friends; living in the centre of Wales means that often people travelling through Wales from north to south (or south to north) and east to west (and west to east) are welcome to break their journey. In the last few weeks we have caught up with old friendships: ministers who trained at the

same time in Memorial College Swansea, where students for the Welsh speaking and English speaking churches were trained together and were introduced at first hand to the context of Welsh life: its history, culture and religion.

2. MY FRIEND'S DILEMMA.

Another old friend who called a few weeks ago made me return to my life as a student at University College Swansea (as it was then known). He is now approaching 60, has studied theology and has reached a mental and spiritual block which to him seems impassable. Let me express it in his words.

*"I have been re-reading the New Testament and realise once more that Jesus is the most significant person in history. The more I read about him, the more I admire him, the more I seek to follow in his steps and walk in his way. I have such respect for Jesus. **My problem is with God.***

I simply cannot get my head around the existence of God.

I look at the size and wonder of the universe and wonder where God can be.

I look at all the things which go wrong in the world and I wonder where God can be.

I know about the difference between physical and spiritual forms of existence;

about visibility and invisibility; that some of the greatest of all human gifts

(like faith, hope and love) being invisible;

about the mystery of personhood and the mystery of the universe;

I have worked at de-mythologizing the contexts of the Old and New Testaments

but what I am left with is 'void, nothingness, a great abyss.'

*I can get on with living my life to the best of my ability; I will seek to live according to the ethics of Jesus of Nazareth and that of other 'good and moral women and men' but **I see no space for God.**"*

3. HOW TO MEET MY FRIEND'S DILEMMA.

Since our conversation,

I reminded myself of how I felt and thought as a young person, especially as a teenager in Sunday school in my home chapel in Tylorstown, and the puzzles, secrets and mysteries we explored.

of my own discussions as a University Student at Swansea

of the theological debates as a ministerial student

as a young minister in Llanidloes and Manselton where in house groups over a period of ten years, we explored all the intellectual and moral problems;

as Moderator, discussions on the dozens of retreats on Caldey and at Trefeca;

2.

living on Penrhys where every conceivable problem was raised as experiential crises during our eighteen years there.

of the 'Llanfair liturgical year' where at the beginning of each year, we tried to place ourselves 'where the searching agnostic was'.

Therefore in the last weeks I returned to those dilemmas and to my reading during the last fifty years.

I re-read notes I have made from the great classical Christian thinkers

and of course discovered the obvious:

My friend's struggle is one which all these thinkers, worth their salt, had also made.

'Faith' has not been won easily by Augustine or Luther or Calvin or Barth, Tillich, Bonhoeffer, Bultmann; by people who taught me: Pennar Davies, Stanley Greenslade, John Marsh, Robert Paul, Ford Battles. And, I too - probably like most of you - have not found the coming to faith easy. It has never been simplistic. It has been a struggle morally, intellectually and spiritually - and it still is a struggle.

And so where am I today and what am I able to suggest to my friend - and to you and to myself? Let us return to this Jesus of Nazareth.

HOW DOES ONE COME TO FAITH?

1. FAMILY HISTORY.

One of the delights of retirement has been my search into family roots. For a whole year I worked assiduously at the family tree and struggled to work out direct ancestors to include the 16 great-great grandparents and many much further back. And of course as I worked away in libraries and public archives and chased registrars, I was confronted by the age-old question:

Q. Who do you think you are?

Q. Are you who you are because of your genetic history?

Q. Are you who you are because of the environments of all these people, and your own particular environment?

Yes, I am I who I am because all my ancestors were born in Wales; all were Welsh speaking and almost all were Welsh Nonconformists from the last part of the Eighteenth century.

Yes to all these questions.

2. MAKING DECISIONS.

But then there was another gift of retirement. I started to keep a diary when I was twelve years old and I have maintained it without fail for the past 58 years. The diaries now amount to 5½ million words and until a few years ago were completely unread and mostly forgotten. Then I began to re-read for the first time and discovered that alongside genetic and environmental history, came **a series of choices, conscious and unconscious - all of which make me the person I am today.** Alongside the choices and the relationships and the events of life, they make me the individual I now am.

3.

Q. AND WHERE IS GOD IN ALL THIS?

Where do I begin? What do I to suggest to my old friend?

I return to the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

Both of us admire him greatly. Both of us think he is the most significant person who has ever lived. But what made him different? What makes him 'more unique' than any one of us? I returned to read the New Testament and looked for that which 'grasped Jesus... gripped him.' and **I discovered the obvious; it was staring me in the face. Jesus cannot be 'understood' if we take away his faith in God.** He was undoubtedly influenced by his upbringing, his context, his religious tradition - the Scriptures of the Old Testament, the Roman occupation, the hopes of a future time when God's ways would be fulfilled - but there was something else.

Q. Who did Jesus think he was?

Q. What did the New Testament writers think he was?

Q. How did they interpret his life and teaching?

Q. Why did the 'ordinary' followers change into forming the dynamic community of the church?

There are many answers - but I want to suggest one way of beginning a fresh exploration for my friend - and you and me?

Let me take you on a brief journey through the New Testament with its many different contexts from Palestine to Asia Minor to the Greek mainland to Rome itself; to Letters and Gospels and visionary writing. Can we start with a foundation relationship?

Jesus trusted God (that does not mean he knew everything about God) but he trusted him as a child trusts a loving parent. The whole of Jesus' life focuses on his awareness of his relationship with God;

everything he teaches is shaped by his relationship with God;

everything he promises to his friends is shaped by his relationship with God;

his warnings to the authorities is shaped by his relationship with God;

his whole life to the point of death is shaped by his relationship with God.

And what kind of God? Especially on this Mothering Sunday, we need to remind ourselves that when Jesus expresses his relationship with God, he is not articulating a gender relationship. Of course he does pray to, refer to, invoke God as Father, but this is partly the result of his Jewish context. If Jesus had been living his earthly life now, he could well be referring to the God/Jesus relationship by using different relationship images (mother, friend, companion). There are ultimately no words or relationships comprehensive enough to articulate fully the God/ Jesus relationship or the God/humankind relationship or the God/all that exists relationship, but the words of Jesus provide us both with the springboard and the foundation which we can trust.

4.

NEW TESTAMENT PASSAGES ON THEME OF 'FATHER'.

*** 1. MARK 14. 35-36 *Garden of Gethsemane***

And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, ‘**Abba, Father**, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.’

*** 2. MATTHEW 5. 44-45 *Sermon on the Mount***

But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be **children of your Father in heaven**; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

MATTHEW 6. 1-8 *Sermon on the Mount*

‘When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, **for your Father** knows what you need before you ask him.

MATTHEW 6. 25-33

‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed **your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things**. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

3. LUKE 6. 36 *Mercy of the Father*

Be merciful, just as **your Father is merciful**.

*** LUKE 10. 21-22 *Jesus Rejoices***

At that same hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, ‘**I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth**, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; **yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.**’

LUKE 22. 42 *Garden of Gethsemane*

‘**Father**, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.’

*** LUKE 23. 34 *On the Cross***

Then Jesus said, ‘**Father, forgive them**; for they do not know what they are doing.’

5.

4. PAUL

* GALATIANS 4. 6-7 *Paul on 'Abba'*

And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

ROMANS 8. 14-17 *Paul on 'Abba'*

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. **When we cry, 'Abba! Father!'** it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

* 5. JOHN 14. 1-14 *The Last Supper: Table Talk*

Jesus the Way to the Father

'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. **In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places.** If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? ... **If you know me, you will know my Father also. Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves.**

The Promise of the Holy Spirit

JOHN 14. 20-21

On that day you will know that **I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.** They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; **and those who love me will be loved by my Father,** and I will love them and reveal myself to them.'

JOHN 17. 20-24 *The Unity of Humankind*

'I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. **As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe** that you have sent me.

I JOHN 3. 1 *The gift of the Father's Love*

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

CONCLUSION

Where then did we begin? With my friend's dilemma:

*"I have been re-reading the New Testament and realise once more that Jesus is the most significant person in history. The more I read about him, the more I admire him, the more I seek to follow in his steps and walk in his way. I have such respect for Jesus. **My problem is with God.**"*

My response is that if you admire, are intrigued by, are enthralled by this man Jesus.... You are consciously led to ask 'What made Jesus the man he was? How did he do fulfil so much in so short a life, and in such a brief ministry?'

6.

It was because

Jesus trusted God (that does not mean he knew everything about God) but he trusted him as a child trusts a loving parent. He loved God as Abba. Jesus trusted God to walk with him throughout life and through death. And the life of Jesus was vindicated by the resurrection and the sharing of the Spirit which will make the life of the world whole.

If trusting in God was enough for Jesus, it is enough for me - and my friend - and all of us?

