LET GOD BE GOD

In the past few weeks, I have grappled with ideas about God: including giving a puppet show from the pulpit (to illustrate breaking the ‘fourth wall of religion’ into the Kingdom of the Imagination - the wall between traditional religious piety and a radical critique of piety; and the Big Metaphor, inevitable in talking about God, (I developed this).

Today I want to talk about the universal and transcendent nature of any relationship with God.

It’s something I take from the Ephesians reading, where we find language that might at first seem alien in our modern culture: ‘he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world, He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, he has made known to us the mystery of his will. He has a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.’

That was a first century Judaeo/Greek picture of the overarching nature of God. If you ask me for my 21 century picture it would be something like this: that God is 1. in the mysterious nature of physical energy 2. In the root of emotional energy – hence God is love and 3. In the energy of consciousness; and that, in some sense, consciousness pervades everything. (no time to try to spell out that one). But God as consciousness gives us God the creator, God the personal, and God the omnipresent.

This is not newfangled. On Friday at Jane Skinner’s funeral, Simon Lockett, who was a popular priest in this parish 18 years ago, led the prayers and prayed to Love, rather than specifically to God. In 1742, Charles Wesley wrote a poem – a hymn in our hymnbook now – *Come O thou Traveller Unknown* about Jacob wrestling with God, in which he says of God, ‘Pure universal Love thou art’.

When I say, Let God be God, there are three ways in which I think this applies.

1. God is big enough to stand up for himself
2. Let’s stop dumbing our religion down
3. How do we get through to the God who is energy, love, and mind, rather than a sort of enthroned figure presiding over the State opening of parliament.

There’s a tradition in the Psalms of challenging God. Psalm 13 ‘How long, O Lord? Will you forget me for ever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul?

Or Psalm 22, quoted by Jesus on the Cross, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest.’

Or, another Jewish example. In Auschwitz, Elie Wiesel tells us, the Rabbis put God on trial for the horrors of the Holocaust and found him guilty.

When Richard Harries was Bishop of Oxford he held a seminar for his central team in which he expounded the paradoxical idea that God can often be experienced by his absence. He had invited Philip Pullman to the seminar as ‘critical commentator’. In his response Philip said, ‘This is like saying, I believe in fairies because there is absolutely no evidence of them whatever.’

God is big enough to stand up for himself.

Dumbing down. We often hear the Church criticised for dumbing down. It is usually understood to be a simplification of language in worship – the obligatory joke at the beginning of a sermon. An anti-intellectualism – a laziness of thinking – the watering down of ideas – and a sentimentalisation of emotion.

The theory is that religion is counter-cultural and therefore difficult for ordinary people to get hold of, so it must be somehow simplified, bowdlerised, like Thomas Bowdler reworked Shakespeare's plays, to cut out the rude bits to make them more suitable for women and children.

Dumbing down is of course an insult to people and generally off-putting, I think. Just as children in school know when you are talking down to them and when you are taking them seriously.

Then God gets reduced. God is not the CEO of the Church. (Sunday worship on Radio 4 occasionally begins with a statement like: God is at work in our area, rather like sorting out the broadband in our area.) God appoints the clergy or stirs up vocations in our area and yet the Church still seems to be a failing organisation. More subtly We are discerning God’s will. Less subtly, God is used to reinforce our opinions.

Let God be God

Getting through.

Prayer. A very personal thing. I don’t want to be prescriptive because there is no right way.

But, when we pray, who or what are we praying to? A sort of parental figure? A creator figure? The man in charge? The life force, love force, forgiveness force?

I have a sense of wanting to be in touch with (in harmony with) the physical, emotional and conscious energy that underpins all that is. And I think in this regard we have to be careful of the cliches of prayer: we pray for the sick and the marginalised; for those in prison; for God to guide our politicians. Cliches dumb down, dilute, weaken.

A prayer for the sick is sometimes extended to those who suffer *in body, mind or spirit*, which is a step further on, but still only headline news as it were. Doesn’t there have to be a deeper empathy? Identifying with them, feeling the compassion of God and the anger of God at injustice, cruelty and pain?

I’ve said before, quite recently I think, that I think penitence is a vital part of getting through – the genuine desire to atone for our failings, for things done and not done; for the stand-out guilts and regrets of our lives – we all have them – the four of five acts and decisions we would like to amend for before we die. This is a way of clearing out the white noise of prayer which prevents us from getting through to the divine. I am persuaded that there is something akin to the collective subconscious, the corporate power of will, which makes a divine harmony that can be tapped into.

And the point of this clarity of vision is to Let God be God. Pure universal love thou art. Otherwise God can be reduced and boxed and localised and made in our own image. For our own good we need to let God be God.