

Sermon Lent 4 Year C 2019

As people of faith it is not a bad question to ask from time to time, how do we imagine God? How do we picture him? Because how we answer that will answer a lot of other things as well. But God, as the source of all being, transcendent, immortal, invisible, means it is hard to find adequate words, images, a description for something so totally above and beyond our comprehension. For many Christians, their image of God is something like Michelangelo's depiction of God on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. And lots of non-Christians lazily imagine that that is how all Christians imagine their God. We have a lot to thank Michelangelo for, but his genius unfortunately sealed in a lot of peoples' mind the idea of God as some kind of 'old man in the sky', remote and stern. And perhaps a sort of cosmic policeman, just waiting to beat us over the head if we stray.

There is, perhaps a *limited* place for those kinds of mental images. But they don't go very far in describing the great and infinite mystery of God. But God is not content to remain in mystery and isolation. God wishes to be known and loved. Yes, God *is* above and beyond our understating. But the great truth of Christian faith is that God shows us what he is like and seeks to draw us into life with him. Christian religion is a revealed religion: God reveals himself to us, shows himself to us, speak to us. And the fullest, the most complete picture we get of God is by looking at Jesus. God remains a mystery, yes. But by looking to Jesus we see God revealed to us in the best and surest way our limited minds and hearts can comprehend.

Now, Jesus himself knew the power of words and images. He also knew how in the faith he had inherited the image of God had become narrow, limited. It became part of the work of Jesus to break through those limited and impoverished views of God. And so, the story placed before us today - the Prodigal Son - as part of that work of Jesus to have us re-think and to reinvigorate our understanding of God. 'The *Return* of the Prodigal Son' by Rembrandt - presented on the covers of your pew bulletins - captures some of the more dramatic themes of the story. The story is well known to us and is unique to Luke. No other gospel writer reports it.

And where Luke places it in his Gospel would suggest a more suitable title would be 'the Lost Son' placing it, as he does, immediately following the parables of 'the lost sheep' and 'the lost coin.' I spent years wondering what 'Prodigal' actually meant until I finally looked it up: wasteful, reckless, dissolute, profligate. The prodigal son then is a boy who is self indulgent, decadent and unrestrained. Indeed, a boy who has *'lost'* his way.

But, to focus on the *boy* really misses Jesus' task to reshape our conception of *God*. Far better for us I think to entitle the parable, '*The Forgiving Father*' - so crucial is *this* to unlocking the story. It is perhaps easy for us to gloss over the extremity of the boys' 'lost-ness'. Maybe we are just so used to self-indulged, reckless, dissolute youth today his sins no longer scandalise or upset us. But for the first hearers of this story it would have both shocked and upset. Where respect for family in Jewish life was paramount, where 'honour your parents' makes it into the 'top ten', the boys' callous request for his inheritance was a scandal of immense disturbance. To ask for an inheritance before the proper time was, of course, to say, '*dad, I wish you were dead!*' But the father agreeing to this unheard-of request was like-wise scandalous. While our instinct might be to give the boy a quick slap and read the riot act, here we have a father confident, non-anxious and secure in his own identity. The price of love is that he cannot impose or force himself on his son.

God creates us in love. And one of the qualities of love is freedom. A love which imposes itself is not true love at all. Freedom carries with it a risk, yes. It is the risk of hurt and rejection. It is the risk that the love we seek to offer and share be will be abused and squandered. We know this all too well in our own lives. It also is the story of Eden in Genesis. Our first parents created in love and freedom abuse and misuse the gift. The order that God rightly establishes in the Garden ignored and violated. But whereas the flaming sword drive Adam and Eve from paradise, the gates to the father's house we hear today remain only open, ready for the return of son.

In Jewish faith the image of the patriarch, the father, sitting at the gate was well known. What was *unknown* was the image of the father running.

And running to embrace! In Rembrandt's picture we see that moment of contact so powerfully. The boy: dishevelled, bald, a scrap of a man, now completely aware of his vulnerability, stupidity and need. And the father: tender, loving and forgiving, his hands those of welcome and reassurance.

Jesus never understood God as an abstract reality. For Jesus, God was not just some force or power. For Jesus, God was not remote and strange and alien. The truth of God as Jesus understood it was of God as a *person*, as a *someone* with whom we could enter into a loving and full relationship. It is why those branches of Christian theology which nervously steer away from language of Father (and indeed Son) get it so wrong. Because it misses the crucial insight that at the heart of the Christian faith in God is *relationship* and the encounter with *persons*. It is a relationship we are invited to share in. Our 'lost-ness' frustrates this. But in God's ever-open embrace he provides the way back.

In the parable today, the return inspires joy and celebration and a party is had by all. But the story does not end for us there. The sad figure of the elder brother is part of the story as well. He represents something of self-righteous, grumpy religion. He stands for the faith that cannot rejoice in God's works of mercy and forgiveness. He stands for those who think that loyalty and obligation are enough, who will not allow their hearts to be moved with either pity or compassion, let alone joy. But the God of Jesus Christ is the one who invites celebration! Every Eucharist reflects that truth: a foretaste of the banquet of eternal life. We ought to be nervous of a faith (and of a church!) lacking generosity, warmth, celebration.

What idea do we have of God? How do we imagine him? Of course, as limited finite beings, our thoughts of God are limited and finite. But God himself shows us what he is like. Jesus shows us what God is like. And he reveals to us God who is tender, merciful and forgiving. A God who celebrates with us, who waits for us, who gives us the space to mess up, and the time to make amends. So often we imagine we cannot approach God. Or sometimes we imagine our duty will save us. But all us are The Prodigal. God is just waiting for us to realise it, so that he can then call the party. Amen.