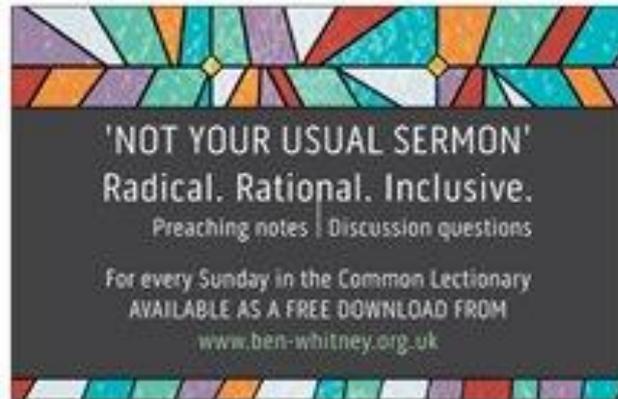


'NOT YOUR USUAL SERMON'

Radical. Rational. Inclusive.

Preaching notes and discussion questions for the Christian Year



SEPTEMBER 2019

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Each week contains my own 3 key themes, a 1300 word reflection on the passages from the Common Lectionary, a key quote and 3 questions for discussion.

READ THIS FIRST!

Let's be clear from the start – I don't believe in a God as usually understood. The Universe just is. It all began about 14 billion years ago just because it did. There was no pre-existing Being who made it all happen. The earth is not the centre of everything; just a tiny insignificant planet in a vastness far too great for me to contemplate. In the past, including when the Bible was written, they thought it was all about us, with a God 'up' there. They were wrong. We are just a part of the heavens. A personal Deity who knows all about me is inconceivable. Things that were previously attributed to a God – weather, illness, death, what happens – just happen. Science tells us 'how'.

The usual response to this is that science doesn't tell us 'why'. But there is no why. No deeper purpose to our existence. No pre-determined meaning. We are indeed just grains of sand or specks of dust. Here today, gone tomorrow. Maybe our planet will be the same eventually. I understand that many people will find such an idea uncomfortable. We'd like there to be a meaning to it all. That's why people have always created religions, to provide a framework within which to understand themselves. Religions have a use as human constructs – but their insights are not a 'revelation' or a 'given' from elsewhere. They're just our ideas and so we have to change them in the light of greater knowledge. Religions have to evolve like everything else – or they die.

I will use the word 'God' in these Notes when I'm quoting other people's ideas. I may even occasionally use it myself as a metaphor or picture. But I never mean a 'Being' who knows us or who wants to 'save' us for Himself. 'Father' (a picture, not a biological description) worked for centuries. It doesn't work so well now. All statements about a God are human inventions and mostly I don't think we need them anymore.

What we do still need is to decide how to live. 'Faith' is not about an assent to a list of statements just because they're in the Bible or the Creeds. It's about how we choose to live – our values, our own defined purposes, what is best for us. Of course many of the old understandings still work without a God – because they were human insights in the first place! That's the point. We have always created our own values and have to go on doing so. But what was thought to be true 2000 years ago might not be right now. Or we might not have always lived up to our values and we need to be constantly revisiting them.

So what of Jesus? Not God. A 'Son of God' in a metaphorical sense. A human person who stands in a long line of those who have suffered for what they believed. Whose life and teachings (if only available to us at second or third hand) seem to offer a picture of 'God' that is quite different from the one usually on offer. One who works by stealth. Whose ways are hidden and found mostly when we care for one another, especially the outsiders and the stranger. Love itself made manifest. An example of how to live without thought of self. Someone still worth trying to know but not because of some impossibly miraculous happy ending. Who 'lives' only if we keep his vision alive. Not in heaven. In us. That's as 'Christian' as I'll ever get.

I hope these Notes encourage you, if you are thinking much the same. If not, I hope I at least make you think. Friendly feedback is always welcome via my website.

TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

September 1st 2019

Jeremiah 2:4-13 Hebrews 13:1-8 and 13-15 Luke 14:1 and 7-14

Psalm 112

MY KEY THEMES

- The Jesus community is open to all who seek him, not dependent on having the 'right' beliefs first
- Genuine inclusion will mean that we will have to change, not just expect others to
- If we claim to be seeking the one 'God' that must involve seeking one humanity as well

It is clear to me that any group or church that meets in the name of Jesus must be inclusive. That sounds obvious but I'm not so sure they always are. It may well say outside: 'All are welcome'. Or does it effectively say, 'All are welcome – but only on our terms'? Or 'Come in and we'll tell you what you need to know so that you can be just like we are!' That isn't being inclusive; it's just selective recruitment. That approach to mission doesn't include people as they are, just in the hope of who they might become. And this required commitment to diversity, as far as I am concerned at least, shouldn't be just about addressing the usual social and cultural barriers, essential though that is. It must also recognise diversity in belief. Perhaps in some ways that is the most important barrier to be overcome for many of those who now feel excluded. The doctrinal entry requirements can seem like a massive impossible wall I will never be able to climb over because I just don't believe they are true. This is so often ignored; the elephant in the room that no-one dares mention.

I sometimes attend a church which is a member of the Inclusive Church Network. It offers a genuine invitation to all and is always a warm place to be. It's set in a poor inner city neighbourhood with a transient multi-ethnic population including many asylum-seekers and refugees. It operates in several languages and worship styles. It uses liturgies that are gender-neutral about God and reflect a variety of traditions. Its mission statement says it does not discriminate *'on any level, on grounds of economic power, gender, mental health, physical ability, race or sexuality. We operate an Open Table where all are welcome to receive communion. All we ask is that you have a heart open to the possibility of God.'*

As a white, reasonably well-pensioned, middle-class, post-graduate educated, heterosexual, married, non-disabled somewhat sceptical male, I'm grateful for the last sentence! It's the only minority box I can tick and it enables me to participate in the Eucharist in a way I wouldn't feel able to do in most other churches. As one of the experimental liturgies says, '*This is the table of the Lord, not of the Church*'. It does not attempt to tell me what I must mean by 'God' or expect me to sign up first to a series of faith statements drawn up in the C4thCE and which cannot be improved upon. There is usually a creed, some versions of which I can say with integrity and some of which I can't. But the table is open either way.

The journey to this degree of inclusiveness has been long and sometimes painful and of course it isn't over yet. Perhaps the most hopeful thing about the contemporary Church is that there are any examples like this at all. Its historical track record is hardly encouraging. Jeremiah's understanding of God, for example, is that He is the fairly jealous type. Only certain tribes and races enjoyed his favour and they had better be grateful! Those whom He has helped in the past shouldn't now go running after other gods – or rather 'non-gods'. He is the only God there is. (This emphasis on monotheism was, some argue, somewhat undermined by the later Christian doctrine of the Trinity). Jeremiah's God, or I would rather say 'god' because *no* description is anything other than a human attempt to describe the indescribable, (see two weeks' time), is shocked and disappointed by his people because they have gone after worthless things. But it's what they have done as much as what they have believed, or not believed, that evidences their failure. It's departing from his *ways* that causes the most offence; what we *do* is what matters most, not just what we say we believe. Maybe Creeds should be all about how we *behave*, not about a set of required doctrines at all.

Of course, 2500 years ago the theological questions I and others may be asking now did not exist; a God was just taken for granted. I'm not arguing that not believing in that kind of God is still 'scriptural', but then I don't see all these ancient writings as authoritative. I am saying that, since Jesus, the old ideas of God have been open to challenge and he was remembered as reminding the religious people of his day about how they are supposed to *live*. He was renowned, it seems, for mixing with 'sinners' and outcasts of all kinds. We don't know where he had been invited to lunch on this particular Sabbath, possibly at some rich person's house. (He was probably breaking the law by going). But he noticed that the most (self) important people were claiming the best seats. So he tells a story. Some of those who thought themselves entitled to places of honour found themselves pushed down, by their own criteria, by the arrival of others who thought themselves even more important. Hoist by their own petard!

The first, in their own estimation, may find themselves last after all. So take the worst seats first and then, you never know, you might be invited to take a better one. There is no room for any kind of superiority or pecking-order at Jesus' table, not even one based on how 'sound' or 'committed' we are. Indeed, perhaps those who think themselves most entitled to be there because they know Jesus 'personally' or can quote their Bibles backwards may find themselves lower down the priority order than they thought, while the heretics and the unbelievers are invited to 'move up higher'. (I'm not claiming any kind of inverted snobbery here - at least I hope I'm not - just counselling caution).

More than that, in scene two of the parable, if you are hosting a meal, says Jesus, don't just invite those who might invite you in return, but those who have no home to invite you to; those who would not be able to afford it or don't have the physical strength or capacity to prepare it. Not only is Jesus' table open to all at the inclusive church that I sometimes go to but there is usually a free lunch afterwards. You don't have to have been at the service, or have a ticket or prove that you need it. And I have noticed that the regular church-goers often discreetly hold back so that others can be fed first. This church wasn't always like this. When the people there said a while back 'All are included' they decided that they had to mean it, and also that 'We will change, as a result, not expect you to'. And change they did. The realm of God is indeed at hand. It encourages me to come again a million times more than an Alpha course ever would!

Paul almost certainly never heard Luke's story but they may have each been addressing a similar theme. We know that from elsewhere in Paul's letters that the Christians' agape-meal had often become an unseemly free for all. I assume they wouldn't need to be reminded about these failings if no-one ever showed them. The social divisions in the churches were sometimes being reflected in their activity together. Here they both remind the believers of the importance of hospitality and inclusion; about being very careful not to claim any kind of superiority. Share in the experience of the marginalised as if you are going through it with them, Paul says. Indeed, you may have something to learn from them.

There is no need for everyone in the Jesus community to be the same. But there is a need to demonstrate that the differences that mean so much in life beyond the church mean nothing here. We are setting an example to others; or perhaps we are at last catching up with a 'world' that is more inclusive than we are! There is no entrance exam. It's not that opportunity is equal; it must be *unequal* reflecting the fact that people start from different places and that no one 'answer' will address every question. Here is 'our' version of God, take it or leave it', is not the Way of Jesus.

We don't expect those with a physical disability or who use a wheelchair for mobility to climb the stairs to get into a church that's 'equally' available for everyone. We make 'reasonable adjustments' and sometimes go well beyond that to make sure none are excluded. As a self-appointed representative of a massive group of people who feel that Jesus is not for them because we can't get over the Creeds, the patriarchal language, the outdated moral values and the impossible (for us) claims about God as some kind of everlasting heavenly Being, I would just ask for the same approach. Embrace the difference! We need to sing in harmony, not just in unison. All are welcome? Really?

KEY QUOTE

There is no room for any kind of superiority or pecking-order at Jesus' table, not even one based on how 'sound' or 'committed' we are. Indeed, perhaps those who think themselves most entitled to be there because they know Jesus 'personally' may find themselves lower down the priority order than they thought, while the heretics and the unbelievers are invited to 'move up higher'.

FOR REFLECTION/DISCUSSION

- Listen to this [short piece](#) by Thomas Tallis and reflect on how the various different lines and notes create a harmony that everyone singing in unison just wouldn't. Is that a metaphor for your church?
- Have a look at your Sunday liturgy or other forms of service that you use. Does the language do justice to a growing sense that 'God' should not always be described in patriarchal male terms that make some feel excluded? What changes might you be able to make?
- How could your church's approach to its mission be seen in new ways to set an example of an inclusive community?

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

September 8th 2019

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 Philemon 1-21 Luke 14: 25-33

Psalm 139: 1-5 and 12-17

MY KEY THEMES

- The people of Jesus have to choose how to live; he can't decide it all for you
- The human power to decide between right and wrong can be a burden but it is also a glorious freedom
- Sometimes you may have to set aside your principles and do what you know is right

Life is all about choices. Tea or coffee? Meat-eater or vegetarian? West Bromwich Albion or Wolverhampton Wanderers? Life or death? Bill Shankly, the legendary manager of Liverpool FC, is quoted as saying: 'Football isn't a matter of life or death. It is much, much, more important than that!' Still, some people may be attracted to a religion rather than a football team because it seems to answer all the big questions for you. It gives you reassurance and a source of truth to follow. This may be particularly true of the more fundamentalist versions of Christianity, as well as those that place greatest emphasis on the authority of leaders or tradition. 'I don't need to make decisions about what is right and wrong; I can look it up in the Bible or follow the Church's teachings'. But is that a path to life, or just to something less than our full humanity? Does it just tie us to a religion, not offer us the freedom to find a genuine faith?

We need to go back to the beginning of Genesis to understand the full implications of these questions. The old writers had dreamed of a golden age before men and women had the power to decide for themselves between good and evil. But of course there never was such a time; it's just a story. Human beings are as they have always been. This moral capacity to choose is what makes us what we are. There was no 'Fall'; if anything the story of the 'Garden of Eden' is about an enlightenment. The stakes of being human are high and the implications great. But we have to take responsibility; not blame our conduct on a 'Devil' (who isn't mentioned in Genesis), or on each other, or hide behind the skirts of a God, Bible or Church that will always tell us what to do. It's scary but unavoidable.

The Old Testament people recognised that being God's 'chosen' people, (in their eyes), was a mixed blessing. These are old tribal ideas of a sub-god that Jesus later challenged, but the contract had implications. They had to accept the rules if they wanted His protection and their God would only care for them if they deserved it by their obedience.

But this is nowhere near enough for modern minds. It reduces our human understanding of the mystery beyond to simply adhering to a whole set of imposed requirements, not a genuinely willing commitment to live in the right way. It is a self-serving instrumental strategy for our own survival, not a truly moral choice based on the best of motives. In the end, if we only do what we believe is right because we think it will be to our eventual advantage, are we actually doing what is right at all? 'Life' should be chosen for life's sake, not because we are afraid of the alternative if we don't. In Paul's letter commending Onesimus, who is no longer literally a slave, Philemon is asked to welcome him back, despite whatever his previous failure was. But he should do so out of genuine love, not merely out of obligation or duty.

It seems that Jesus taught that doing the right thing can involve a cost. Having to make our own decisions risks setting us against each other because there isn't necessarily only one 'right' path. Those who walk in his Way will have to bear their own crosses. There is some ambiguity about possible meanings here with several different ideas mixed up together in the way that Luke records them. Was Jesus foreshadowing his own fate? But remember that the record we have of Jesus' teaching wasn't written down until well after the end of the story was known. Or is he using the idea of 'carrying your cross', which must have been a common sight in those brutal times of Roman occupation, as a metaphor for the burden that doing the right thing can often be? We can't be sure.

But Jesus also seems to recognise that such choices have to be carefully considered before we make them. Weigh up the alternatives and make sure you have the resources to see it through when the going gets tough. Giving away *all* your possessions? Is that a standard that any of us could realistically live up to? I have responsibilities; a family and so on. I don't think I could ever actually do it and would it really be right for me to do so? It seems there were women around Jesus who used their money to support him. So is it enough just to seek to be generous? Or am I only avoiding doing what I know would be right? I'll never know the 'answer' to dilemmas like these because there is no one clear way to follow. I hear Jesus' challenge, but doesn't he also suggest that taking the moral high ground over such a controversial and complex area of human morality should be done with great care? (See also two weeks' time).

Such choices should weigh very heavily upon us and I suspect that some element of compromise is inevitable. Sorry Jesus; that's probably not good enough but there I am. At least I am trying to be honest; thinking it through, not pretending that there is always one obvious option available.

I'm now going to try and apply all this to a very difficult and challenging moral issue. We have the ability to make a life-changing difference to an unborn child, or to prevent them developing or ever being born at all. Here is a fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that our ancestors could never have imagined; a question about 'choosing life' that no old rule book or sub-god can answer for us. My older brother had muscular dystrophy and died while he was still a relatively young man. Would my mother have been right to choose not to have him had that choice been available to her? Obviously his family don't think so now. But many of those I knew when I was growing up who also had the condition died as children amid great suffering and grief for them and for their families. If we could manipulate genes before birth, even if it meant using tissue from unborn foetuses, and so prevent other children from inheriting such conditions and diseases, should we do so? There is no easy 'right' answer here; please don't tell me that there is because the Bible says that human life is sacred'. 'God' is regularly complicit in the slaughter of whole families and tribes in the OT, (as long as they're not among his 'chosen' ones).

But the Psalmist gives us a beautiful poem about the 'God' who is the depth of our being. All the more remarkable because at that time there was virtually no actual understanding of how babies developed before birth. They didn't have scans or ultrasound! It was thought then, and indeed up to about the C15thCE, that the mother contributed nothing to this process and simply provided a safe space for the male seed to grow. That was clearly wrong and devalued the mother's contribution with considerable cultural and religious implications. (Of course I too have a particular perspective here: I am a father and grandfather. So I sometimes wonder if we are now in danger of an equal ignorance with any suggestion that only women can have any worthwhile view on issues like these). Life is indeed miraculous. Not in the sense that it cannot be explained but in the sense that it makes us wonder. So it should; we are amazing. And all of this will leave many to conclude that we shouldn't interfere with 'nature'. But we do so after we are born. I would have died as a teenager if modern medicine hadn't intervened. Is it always and every time right to bring an unwanted or severely disabled child into the world? Perhaps people have made bad choices, but can I ever truly understand what it is like to be in someone else's shoes? Does compassion sometimes require us to accept the 'least worst' outcome? And is my own life necessarily any more whole or morally sound than those who I might criticise?

I want to celebrate life, but I know that not everyone starts where I do. And I cannot take away other people's human responsibility to make their own decisions. There is no room for zealots here, religious or otherwise. So there can be no rallying call at the end of this sermon to close down all abortion clinics and embryo research centres or to always defend 'a woman's right to choose'. Perhaps the only 'right' response is silence; not because I don't care or have nothing to say, but because this cross is heavy. I can only go on carrying it as best I can and hope to make good choices along the way. *'How deep I find your thoughts, O eternal spirit/energy/breath of life; how great is the sum of them'*. And how careful I must be not to suggest that *my* thoughts, hard as I might try, can ever be more than just that, not the final word as if I were God Himself.

KEY QUOTE

Human beings are as they have always been. This moral capacity to choose is what makes us what we are. There was no 'Fall'; if anything the story of the 'Garden of Eden' is about an enlightenment. But the stakes of being human are high and the implications great.

FOR REFLECTION/DISCUSSION

- Do you agree that the ability to make moral choices is what makes us human? What are the implications?
- Choose a complex moral problem that doesn't appear to have any clear 'right' or 'wrong' conclusion for the follower of Jesus. Perhaps find out more about it first, hear both 'sides', before considering what might be said about it.
- Celebrate the miracle of human life. Tell some stories of how 'wonder-full' we can be.

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

September 15th 2019

Exodus 32: 7-14 1 Timothy 1: 12-17 Luke 15: 1-10

Psalm 51: 1-11

MY KEY THEMES

- We need to be careful that we don't treat our 'gods' as if they are 'God'
- Our journey is not about persuading people to follow a 'religion', it's about inspiring them to live in the Way of Jesus
- 'Worship' may not be the best word to describe our relationship with Jesus

OK, so I've avoided Psalm 14:1: *'The fool says in his heart, there is no God'*! Actually, that isn't quite my position. Just that everything we may say about a 'God' is only *our* idea of God not a literal description of anything. I don't believe in any of those 'gods'. If those who do claim to know all about a supernatural God don't take the objections of others seriously, then the whole Jesus story will increasingly be rejected as anachronistic and irrelevant. That would be a pity. In a moment we'll see that the word doesn't always have to mean the human projection that we usually take for granted. And the Jeremiah passage, which calls us all 'stupid children' doesn't, for me, make it very likely that anyone will listen to us if that's where we start. As my whole approach I hope makes clear, most people have become pretty fed up with the Church and its representatives lecturing them about how they 'ought' to behave and what they 'ought' to believe', when the planks sticking out of their own eyes are only too evident. It is perfectly reasonable to question what is claimed to be true; we need inspiring (being breathed into) not deflating!

Some weeks ago we were also presented with a God who had to be persuaded not to act out his anger on the world; that time by Abraham, this time by Moses. It will crop up again in a few weeks. These are of course very ancient tales from over 2500 years ago and it would surely be unwise to suggest that they offer us much that hasn't been revisited since, not least by Jesus. The people had been worshipping the images that they had made, not YHWH who had brought them out of slavery. But can we really be expected to do anything else?

The prohibition in the 10 Commandments, (devised over time of course, not dictated directly by God in a series of lightning strikes as depicted in the Charlton Heston film), had recognised the danger of 'graven images'. But there is scarcely a religion throughout history which has not ignored this advice and most are littered with images, if not graven then written in words. Christians (and Jews) may have tried to avoid this mistake but clearly they haven't been entirely successful. Images of God's 'mother', if not of God Herself abound. The Sistine Chapel breaks all the rules. Some images of the Trinity, or even of saints, are worshipped as if they were themselves images of God. And many of the descriptions which populate our scriptures, prayers, hymns and liturgies are, in the end, no more than word-images, ascribing to God human attributes, or their opposite: 'Almighty'; 'All-powerful'; 'Immortal' or even 'Love'. What are these but our own ideas, even as used by Paul in this passage? Human concepts raised up to the Divine but which are still just human images nonetheless.

So am I an a-Theist, or just an a-theist? Am I, and millions of others like me, just rejecting the 'gods' that human beings have created, not necessarily the 'God' that cannot be described, known or in any way experienced because we are bound by our human understandings and language? I certainly do reject the 'god' that I find in much of the Bible, and not just as here portrayed in the Old Testament as a vengeful tribal tyrant. I reject the 'god' that I have heard about in many churches who requires me to jump through certain doctrinal hoops before I can find eternal life and avoid ending up in hell. I reject the 'god' who regards those with a certain sexual orientation as less than fully human or the 'god' who was worshipped by a whole nation dedicated to the suppression and dehumanisation of black people. I reject the 'god' who promises financial prosperity to those who give lots of money to his representatives on earth or the 'god' who says it's OK to kick other people out of lands that 'he' has promised to his chosen ones. I reject the 'god' who speaks only through a set of old books and hasn't spoken since.

These are all idols, not literal descriptions. If we ask people to 'believe' in them, we are offering them only a set of human claims, dressed up as somehow coming from somewhere else. But they don't. They are ours and we need to be ready to change them, not worship them. Does even the remembered tradition about Jesus offer anything different? At least his portrayal of the 'Father' is more accommodating and understanding than many of the older images. But even Jesus used human language, relevant to his time and setting. Such a male image is now outdated. Did he ever actually try to describe himself in other than human concepts? I don't think so.

So it's enough to say he is 'like' a shepherd. Sheep are hardly the best example to portray the believers – we seem to be back to stupid again! Of course, if a shepherd did leave the 99 sheep in the wilderness and go in search of the lost one, how many sheep would he end up with? Only 1! Perhaps this is another example of Jesus' sense of humour. But it's a good reminder that walking with him is more about risk than security; more about being out there with him looking for the lost, rather than spending all our time keeping each other company. Look at the setting where Luke places this story. As with nearly all his remembered teaching, Jesus is not in the Temple where God is usually found; he's eating out, again! And not with those that respectable people 'ought' to be mixing with. He's out there living life to the full; the 99 will just have to look after each other.

I wonder if the whole underlying point of the Christian story is that it is impossible to say or know anything about 'God', only to live a human life in all its fullness? That it's OK to tell stories, draw pictures, throw our ideas around for discussion with one another, as long as we remember that the only place we can look for an understanding of any deeper truth is within ourselves. We need to remember that a human person - as much of 'God' as we can ever hope to know – is at the heart of it. Perhaps the best advice would be to drop the word 'worship' from our vocabulary about Jesus altogether. It immediately puts us into a relationship with something, or someone, who should not be worshipped because it is not 'God', only a human image. We should be not giving our total unquestioning allegiance to any creed, doctrine, institution or structure. We should not be worshipping scriptures, sermons or those who preach them. *Any* activity that we include as part of our personal or corporate spiritual life is just a human activity – to be celebrated, explored, shared and deepened, but never to become the *object* of our devotion. It's not only 'pagan' gods that may turn out to have feet of clay (Daniel: 2)

Paul puts 'Christ' at the centre, but even that cosmic figure may become a distraction. Is he still the real Jesus? Turn him into a god who lives and reigns in heaven and who is to be 'worshipped and glorified' and all the rest and have you lost touch with the 'son of man' who is supposed to be alongside us, not ruling over us? 'Follow me', the story says, not 'Worship me'. Maybe that is enough. Was the Church ever right to equate Jesus with 'God'? Is that just another kind of idolatry? In Philip Pullman's fantasy novel '*The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*', (Canongate 2010) Mary has twins. When Jesus dies as an apparent failure, his brother Christ takes over and becomes the focus of worldwide success and worship, but in a way which he knows was not what Jesus had wanted. It's a clever and challenging idea, ignored by most believers.

Those who talk about 'Christ' when they mean the human Jesus are muddling up two very different elements of the story. Maybe Pullman is asking a very important question. Has the worship of the Christ figure, essentially created by the later Church, not claimed by Jesus himself, overtaken the example of the real human person behind it all? And which, in all honesty, can tell us most about the possibility of a 'God' we cannot ever actually know because She cannot be reduced to simply an image of our own creation? The NT does not actually say that 'Jesus is God'; only that he embodied 'God-ness' as a human person. 'Christ' is just a Messianic title, not an ascription of divinity. But is it possible to avoid idolatry altogether? Maybe not, so it may be best to admit it and proceed with greater care.

KEY QUOTE

We need to remember that a human person - perhaps as much of 'God' as we can ever hope to know – is at the heart of it. Perhaps the best advice would be to drop the word 'worship' from our vocabulary about Jesus altogether. It immediately puts us into a relationship with something, or someone, who should not be worshipped because it is not 'God', only a human image.

FOR REFLECTION/DISCUSSION

- Do you agree that there are elements of life that can become 'idols'? What examples would you give and how can we guard against it? Don't just look outside the Church!
- Read and discuss Philip Pullman's novel. It's quite short. Do you find it outrageous or clever? Or something else?
- Is Jesus sometimes treated as an idol? Is it even right to talk about 'worshipping' him as if he were God? This is a difficult question so treat other people's insights with respect.

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

September 22nd 2019

Amos 8: 4-7 1 Timothy 2: 1-7 Luke 16: 1-13

Psalm 113

MY KEY THEMES

- Material wealth raises questions about where our priorities lie, personally and together
- The prophets' challenge about inequality still rings true in the modern world. How should we respond?
- Maybe wealth is not the issue; it's more about how you use it. Or perhaps it is the issue!

This selection of readings raises many practical challenges, questions and puzzles. What is Luke claiming about Jesus here? We'll come to that in a minute. It seems that there is some confusion about his sources and what we have in the gospel text is a bunch of ideas muddled up together, some of which appear in other places in the other gospels; some of which are unique to Luke. The actual words and intention of Jesus' teaching may be somewhat elusive. Is he really praising dishonesty?

But let's start with the more general issues of money, power and human priorities. There can be no doubt that our kind of society is one completely outside the experience of the ancient writers. Most of us have undreamed-of wealth by their standards. A few were 'rich'; some were 'comfortable' (probably including Jesus' family) and most were 'poor'. Of course some in our culture are still fabulously wealthy compared to most people – and so are some institutions. Many would include the Church in that group with its land, assets and investments. Then most of us are rich by the standards of the world in general. Then there are those who are genuinely poor; tied to an unjust benefits system, stuck in scandalously low paid jobs for the work they do; subsisting and surviving, not really living. And then there are the *really* poor across the world. Wealth was always seen in the past as deserved; poverty likewise. Now we understand that things are not always that simple. There's a heavy slice of good fortune involved. I am glad I am not poor; of course I am. It would be hypocritical to suggest otherwise. But it can be a burden and a worry. (I support an excellent charity that helps entrepreneurs in developing countries with loans that you can then lend again when they're repaid: <https://lendwithcare.org/>)

Should I just make myself less rich, or try to use what I have more wisely and generously? Each of us has to find an answer. Religious people often overlook how much the OT writers criticise wealth. God's 'bias to the poor', an understanding that has come to the fore in the last 50 years, largely through the influence of 'liberation theology' from Latin America, Asia and Africa, is a very welcome and powerful message, straight from the Bible. Amos doesn't mince his words. He was active in the 8th BCE, a time of general prosperity which was clearly not being shared by all. He was an outsider from the south, preaching to the indifferent north. (Maybe we need to reverse the direction today in the UK but the worldwide perspective would be the same). Listen to his complaints: trampling the poor underfoot like unwanted leftovers; desperate to get the weekend over so the money-making can carry on; fixing the exchange and interests rates to benefit the lenders; fiddling the balance sheet to exaggerate the bottom line. And some still say that 'religion' has nothing to do with 'politics' and how we organise our society! Those who make the key decisions should indeed be remembered in our services and prayers, *and* be subject to all the democratic levers at our disposal. Praying costs nothing. Actions are needed too.

Or listen to the Psalmist who talks of his God lifting up the poor from the very dust of the earth and setting them alongside the princes. Current inequality offends the way things are supposed to be. I recently had the opportunity to visit Vietnam and the devastating War Remnants Museum. The most moving moment in the musical *Miss Saigon* is at the start of the second half about the children left behind after the war had ended: [*They're called 'bui-doi', the 'dust of life'*](#). Not easy viewing in this old recording, but 'they are all our children too'. If we are one world, one humanity and, for those for whom this is still true, created by the one God, there is no room for a personal salvation without a corporate healing. Should we feel guilty about our failures? Yes I think we should. Not because it will condemn us eternally but because complacency cannot be the right human response to war, poverty and injustice. Of course there are compromises. Of course I could do more. Of course I can't change the world, but I can at least change myself. And not retreat into a cosy self-assurance that the prophets condemned just because I think that God has no interest in such things, only in me and my 'salvation'.

What then of Luke's passage? I have already made it clear that we cannot treat the gospels as the very words of Jesus. His story has been through many hands later. Most of this particular sequence of sayings is only in Luke, like the story of the runaway son that precedes it, so we can't compare it with other synoptic versions as we can with some other 'difficult' passages.

But his source may have muddled up several different sayings, or 'Luke' may have edited them himself, if rather clumsily. Jesus seems to be commending the steward for his dishonesty; reducing the debts that were owed to his master in order to win friends who might be expected to come to his rescue later once he'd lost his job. Transferring the obligation towards his master into a debt he could call on himself. The master lost out but he could probably afford it. The steward was more interested in making sure that he would be OK; he was too lazy to work hard and too proud to beg so this was his insurance against starvation. Not much of an example surely when it comes to how to treat money and possessions, or each other, responsibly?

Some commentators argue that the steward wasn't doing anything illegal, just using creative accounting! Maybe the master's wealth had been obtained unjustly and this was a bit of socialist redistribution! Or it's all really about the Pharisees, (see v.14ff which this selection doesn't contain), who were apparently very skilled at managing financial and commercial concerns to their own advantage. They got round the laws about not charging excessive interest (usuary) by complex legal arguments that allowed loans based on common commodities like oil and wheat. No-one was without at least some of these basic items so making a financial return on them wouldn't leave anyone in poverty as was technically prohibited. So maybe Jesus was exposing their hypocrisy by saying that the steward was behaving no worse than they did. Putting themselves at the centre, not God. That would fit with much else he seems to have said but we can't know the original context precisely.

Luke has arranged these sayings with a running commentary of his own going on alongside. This is him addressing his readers, not part of the remembered sayings of Jesus. In vv.8-9 Luke is using them to make a point 40 or more years later. Crafty people might be worth admiring because at least they are preparing for what lies ahead. The 'sons of light', those who now formed the fledgling Church of Jesus to whom he was writing, would do well to be equally prepared, given the context of Jesus' expected imminent 'return'. They need to be taking out insurance to secure their spiritual future once the crisis comes. Maybe Luke changes Jesus' point to make his own.

But then we are back to some different sayings, put here because they are also about money that, in the case of v.10, seems to echo Matthew's story of the talents. It's not so much having wealth that is the problem; it's how you use it. (See 1Timothy 6:10 next Sunday. It's the 'love' of money that brings bad consequences, not money itself). Money can get in the way, or it can be used creatively and for the greater good.

But the liberation theologians would say that this is all the equivalent of arguing about angels and pinheads. If, like millions, you don't have any wealth in the first place, then you're not then tempted to misuse it. This is a classic 'first world' problem irrelevant to the genuinely poor. And of course they are right. Often those who are poor are *more* generous than those who are rich. It is a luxury to worry about how best to use your money, of no significance for those without any. We do well to still hear their prophetic words. Perhaps, despite Luke's emphasis, we also do well not to regard our spiritual journey as based only on securing our own eventual reward and security. Jesus seems to have said much about not relying on wealth to make us happy. Is there also a challenge not to think we can ever bank enough holy credit to be sure that we can draw it out again when we need it? Part 2 on a similar theme next week.

KEY QUOTE

If we are one world, one humanity and, for those for whom this is still true, created by the one God, there is no room for a personal salvation without a corporate healing. Should we feel guilty? Yes I think we should. Not because it will condemn us but because complacency cannot be the right response to poverty and injustice.

FOR REFLECTION/DISCUSSION

- Find out some more about 'liberation theology'; and discuss its challenges and opportunities. Do we listen to Christian voices from elsewhere in the world as much as should?
- We often regard talking about money as rather tasteless and that such things are 'private'. Is that a taboo that we need to break whether talking about ourselves or our church?
- Share some examples of how money has been used wisely to benefit others. Does this make wealth less of an obstacle to living in the Way of Jesus, or are we just kidding ourselves!

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

September 29th 2019

Jeremiah 32: 1-3a; 6-15 1 Timothy 6: 6-19 Luke 16: 19-31

Psalm 146

MY KEY THEMES

- All claims about what happens after our human life are ideas that we have created
- Do we portray the prospect of an afterlife as a threat or a promise?
- Perhaps our hope should be more focused on this life, and on how we die, rather than worrying too much about what comes next

'Imagine there's no heaven; it's easy if you try'. Most people no longer believe in any kind of afterlife, if they're being honest. I don't. That makes me a Sadducee in Jesus' context. Polls suggests that many regular churchgoers and even some otherwise enthusiastic Christians don't really believe in it either, nice or nasty, or not at least for members of their own families who don't share their faith. Many people may still talk of meeting up with loved ones again, but do they really believe it? On the whole we are generally agnostic; prepared to leave it to whatever happens, even if the prospect of heaven or hell was once a pretty substantial motivator for taking religion rather more seriously than we do now. But the whole concept poses a tricky moral dilemma, not helped by what seems to have been Jesus' emphasis that things might not turn out quite as expected!

Of course there is still some residual superstition around; best to believe it just in case. When I was a Baptist Minister I was regularly asked to take funerals for people who hadn't been to church for years. Former mining and industrial communities were often more instinctively 'Chapel' rather than 'Church' in those days so I got those that no other church claimed first! It was a privilege to do it and often the best part of the job as far as I was concerned, even if it rarely led to more attendance on Sundays. I always made it clear that you don't have to have a religious funeral. We can just say how thankful we are for knowing Bill, tell a few happy stories about his life, express our care and concern for those left behind, say goodbye and then adjourn to the pub – though one widow did admit to me afterwards that she was glad to see the back of the selfish old bastard!

But they mostly stuck to the traditional formula; mumbling through the prayers, hardly ever singing the hymns with any enthusiasm if it was anything other than 'The Lord's my Shepherd' and looking generally embarrassed by the whole occasion. Is this a sense of a 'love that will not let me go' or just a cultural norm that can't really be challenged at such a sensitive time? Maybe a bit of both.

Is the idea of a life beyond this one a threat or a promise? Looking back at Christian history you would have to conclude that threat was often the more dominant factor. There are endless shocking examples of how the prospect of an eternity in hell was used to maintain the power of the Church over people's lives – often with a massive element of hypocrisy in terms of the personal and corporate morality of those making such judgements. Of course it worked well in less enlightened times. But it doesn't work now – though some believers still seem primarily driven by a desire for their own salvation or a wholly unhealthy and inhuman wish to see others condemned. It could be argued that any emphasis on believing in Jesus in order to secure your own reward, (and, by implication to deny it to others who didn't believe as you did), is morally reprehensible and has no place in any spiritual journey.

So what of the more positive idea that life after death offers us hope? This too has been an important driver of Christian thinking, especially for those who have little to hope for in this life. 'Whatever there is next, it can't be worse than this'. Many religious traditions, born out of poverty and suffering, stress that there is compensation to come or the hope of better luck next time. I can absolutely understand the attraction of that. But I still feel this is missing the point and pinning our hopes on an entirely human wish that 'things can only get better' after this vale of tears is over.

In Old and New Testament times there were mixed views about what, if anything, came next. The idea of 'Sheol' (Hebrew) or 'Hades' (Greek), the place of the dead, had evolved over hundreds of years from a belief that everyone ended up the same to concepts of different compartments for the 'righteous' and the 'wicked'. Some believed in resurrection, bodily or otherwise. Some talked of 'paradise' where God was and somewhere else that was the opposite. We are not, of course, still tied to any such ideas just because they are in the Bible, any more than we are tied to their understanding that the Universe was in 3 decks with the earth in the middle. Space travel has shown us that we are part of the 'heavens' and that these concepts are all metaphors and pictures, not literal descriptions.

I think we would do better to focus on finding the hope *within* our current experience, not looking for a future alternative. Jeremiah bought a field when he knew the city was about to fall and the people driven into exile. Property prices would crash and savings would be worthless. But he put his money where his hope was and trusted that one day the people would return, houses and fields and vineyards would be restored and he would be able to redeem his investment. Others around him must have thought him mad and were busy trying to grab whatever they could to take with them – no doubt they would lose it later and have nothing left to return to. The Psalmist hopes for a reversal of life's fortunes not in heaven, but on earth, when the poor and the oppressed will find justice and the hungry will be fed. (There are obvious echoes here of what seems to have been Jesus' own emphasis and how he was remembered as pointing to the 'signs' of the rule of God: 'on earth as it is in heaven').

The story of the rich man and the beggar was probably already known before Jesus from other Jewish teaching, with a twist perhaps added by Luke. Incidentally, what a long way we have come – or have we – from when the forgotten verse of 'All things bright and beautiful' went: *'The rich man in his castle; the poor man at his gate. God made them high or lowly and ordered their estate'*. Blaming God for our inequalities was a great way of avoiding doing anything about them. There's no excuse for not knowing that wealth is an obstacle to human fulfilment; the law and the prophets had made it clear. You can't take it with you. Yet still we often don't get the message about being more generous before it's too late.

And then there's the sting in the tail. Even someone rising from the dead won't be enough to convince us of the dangers of selfishness. Is this Luke, writing from after the Easter experience, telling his Jesus community that they had better not get too comfortable? Many scholars think so. It seems likely, judging by Paul's letters, that issues of inequality were often arising. In 1 Timothy, one of the late 'pastoral epistles', the fledgling church also has to be reminded of the dangers of material possessions, the importance of living well and not trusting too much in the status that the luck of life has conferred upon you.

The funeral service, using the words of 1 Timothy 6 v.1 makes it clear that we all end up the same. No matter how lavish the coffin or how large the legacy, when you're dead you're dead! That seems to me to be the only viable truth which has any degree of certainty, though it sometimes feels as if our kind of society is in complete denial about that obvious reality.

We increasingly seem to think we can actually cheat death. The prospect of living ever longer, which personally I find a horrifying prospect, or even our obsession with lotions, potions and surgical interventions to hold back the inevitable ageing process, are ways of pretending it will never happen. We hide our dead away rather than laying them out in the parlour for all to see. Some churches seem to see death only as a cause for celebration, not the expression of human grief and sadness. A recent example in my own experience was where, even after a suicide, the word wasn't mentioned at the funeral, which was full of happy songs and colourful balloons! Isn't this just a denial of the painful reality? I don't relish the thought of dying. But neither do I feel it is right to rage against it or pretend it is nothing at all. It's part of being human. Life comes to an end. So maybe the best we can hope for is to live well, and then to die well too.

KEY QUOTE

Many religious traditions, born out of poverty and suffering, stress that there is compensation to come or the hope of better luck next time. I can absolutely understand the attraction of that. But I still feel this is missing the point and pinning our hopes on an entirely human wish that things can only get better after this vale of tears is over.

FOR REFLECTION/DISCUSSION

- What do you really believe about heaven and hell? How important are these concepts for you as an element of faith?
- How does your church offer care to the dying and bereaved? Are we too afraid to talk about death? Do you see it as a pastoral privilege or an evangelistic opportunity?
- What do you think about the way our society handles death? Are there some key messages we need to share in order to help people to 'die well'? Richard Holloway's short book '*Waiting for the last Bus*' (Canongate 2018) is well worth reading.

October Notes available from mid-September