

Sunday 3 January: Second Sunday of Christmas

"No one has ever seen God" (John 1.18)

Readings: Ephesians 1.3-10; John 1.10-18

"No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the father's heart, who has made him known." (John 1.18)

The height of this pulpit creates both expectation about the word being lifted high among us and puts pressure on the preacher who begins with a prayer and invocation to speak, "In the name of God". Preaching is not to be undertaken "unadvisedly, lightly or wantonly...but reverently, discreetly, soberly and in the fear of God". A reminder of that in the new year is helpful, to me. You, too, have a similar responsibility to come prepared and to listen, "In the name of God."

George Fox, founder of the Quakers in the late 1640's, despaired at the clergy of the Church of England. When he asked them about God, these men educated in Oxford and Cambridge, would reply that so and so says this and another says that. Fox exploded on the 'steeple keepers', "But thou, what canst thou say?"

I've got some sympathy for my seventeenth century colleagues lambasted by Fox. It is genuinely difficult to speak of God, hard to find the words, difficult to create helpful and insightful new images.

There are exercises to help us speak of God which work well in study groups. David Jenkins, a former Bishop of Durham who had been Professor of Theology, used to ask his students to summarise what they could say about God in the fewest possible words. One of the best was,

"God is. God is as He is in Jesus. There is hope."

No matter how good, it's only a talking point.

I very much like the idea that Jesus is 'the human face of God' but it is very helpful that we don't actually have a picture of what Jesus looked like. This individual, in whom we see God fully, is an everyman. In Jesus what we have is a person fully alive, who is loving, heals and makes peace. In him we see God fully. In this person, fully human *and* fully divine, we see our own human nature raised into God's nature.

I have sometimes asked people to draw a picture of God. A nun asked me whether I should be doing this as the second commandment is that we should not make a graven image of God. She declined to take part in the exercise and presented a blank piece of paper. It was a very Biblical response because there is a tradition within the Scriptures that no one has seen God. (It is also an Islamic tradition and is found throughout the world's religious faiths.) The same tradition maintains we cannot even speak God's name for to do so would be to have power over God. The four Hebrew letters above the sanctuary, which are the Hebrew name of God, are transliterated YHWH, which cannot be spoken as there are no vowels. In the reality it's too long winded to keep saying, "the unpronounceable tetragrammaton". So we have to say something, and we say "Yahweh".

On the wall in my study I am privileged to have a wonderful picture of God. It is full of light, so dazzling that the forms within it are quite difficult to see – a circle, a body, a cross, a dove. Probably the art critics would tell us it's not a great painting, but it has become so to me. I find its energy inspiring and have come to love it, but not just as a work of art. It has an extraordinary provenance and was given to me for St Martin's by Joanna and Charles Woodd.

This picture of the Trinity was painted by Marian Bohusz, a Polish mathematician married to Cicely Saunders, the founder of St Christopher's Hospice in Sydenham. It was given to Joanna's late father, Bishop John V Taylor, a former missionary in East Africa, General Secretary of the Church Missionary Society and Bishop of Winchester. John was one of the great bishops of the Church of England in the late twentieth century. He died eight years ago and some of you will remember him preaching here.

So this isn't just a painting. It has associations. It has come out of a community of service and prayer at St Christopher's. It was being prayed with by a bishop who was evidently holy long before I saw it.

The painting is not a literal representation of God. It cannot be. Whatever we say about God is always going to be provisional. It cannot be otherwise when the finite speaks of the infinite. But our attempts to speak of God deepen our faith and understanding. Our attempts to live in response to God individually, in our families, and as a Christian community deepen our discipleship.

As I left home for work this morning, after a week's holiday, my wife, a Quaker like George Fox said, "I look forward to hearing the perfect sermon." There is no such thing, but there is a community of people who gather in Christ's name and break bread and drink wine in memory of him. Our lives are illuminated by our reading the Scriptures and we try to model our lives in imitation of Christ. We do so imperfectly. How could it be otherwise? But here Christ meets us again, and again, and again, and we pray that we will be joined with him, "in Communion".

"God is. He is as he is in Jesus. There is hope."

On this first day of the week, on this second Sunday after Christmas, Happy New Year.