

Sunday 2 November 2008 : All Souls Day

Religious Imagination

Readings: 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 6:37-40

Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.

“There’s probably no God, so stop worrying and enjoy your life”

For those of you who might have missed it, that’s the slogan put forward by the British Humanist Association that will appear on London’s bendy buses from January next year. Unsurprisingly the campaign has attracted the support, both morally and financially of Richard Dawkins, one of the most prominent and evangelistic voices for atheism in the public square.

Dawkins himself in usual style said: “The campaign to put alternative slogans on London buses will make people think – and thinking is anathema to religion”. While the chief executive of the British Humanist Association said “We see so many posters advertising salvation through Jesus or threatening us with eternal damnation, that I feel sure that a bus advert like this will be welcomed as a breath of fresh air.”

The word “probably” in the slogan: *“There’s probably no God, so stop worrying and enjoy your life* has attracted a great deal of comment – is there just a hint of lingering doubt in the atheists’ minds, so let’s our hedge bets and say probably? Well Dawkins would say that it’s simply that you can’t fully prove a negative assertion like the non-existence of God. Dawkins himself would prefer to say “God almost certainly doesn’t exist”, but that doesn’t trip off the tongue quite so easily as a slogan!

It wasn’t the probably that really caught my eye though. It was more the irony of Dawkins and the like worrying so much about other people worrying that they have been prepared to put up something like £140,000 to ease our anxieties!

The one point that I would agree with Dawkins is that, in thinking about the sort of God portrayed by Christian groups who are quite so ready to proclaim eternal damnation to those who disagree with them, I for one would be very glad if such a God does not exist!

Thankfully I’d say that the sort of God I see reflected in the word of scripture, borne witness to lives of so many, dead and living, known and unknown who have encouraged and inspired me, and the God whose reality touches me in mystery of this holy sacrament and in so many other encounters, bears little reality to the concept of God whom Dawkins assumes Christians believe in. But it says much for our collective failure as a church to witness to a much different picture of God, that bendy bus sloganising gains any support at all.

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Reflecting on that passage from the first letter of Peter, I was forcibly struck by the way it conveys with such passion and conviction that characteristic which the bendy bus slogan assumes is congenitally absent in religious believers – joy. The community to whom Peter writes are Christians

experiencing a level of persecution and violent opposition that makes Dawkins appear a pussy cat in comparison, and yet able to speak of rejoicing with an indescribable and glorious joy.

Dawkins of course would dismiss such rejoicing as unthinking folly and a sop to those without the intellectual and moral capacity to rely on their own strength. I would characterise it slightly differently. I would describe the picture portrayed in that letter as the fruit of disciplined Christian formation that enables us to see differently. I would characterise it as something called the religious imagination. It's not that thinking is anathema to religion; far from it; religion at its best is what helps us to acknowledge the limitations of our perception, and challenges us to think in new ways.

Last week when we marked Bible Sunday and reflected on what it means to be a community rooted and grounded in the word of God, I spoke about the Christian life as being about the formation of good habits. It is the very ordinary stuff of Christian living – prayer, worship, the sacraments, the scriptures, the service of others –that goes on day by day and week by week that enables us to see differently. It is the very ordinary stuff of Christian living that enables us to see the ambiguity of the world around us truthfully and honestly and yet to maintain hope and to be open to the possibility of transformation.

Most of us thank God will never experience the sort of persecution that the Christians to whom Peter wrote, yet all of us will know the reality of pain, or loss or struggle at some stage in our lives. And what sustains us through those times, and enables us to emerge aware albeit fleetingly, of a deep inner and unshakable joy, is the discipline of the ordinary Christian life, walking faithfully with Christ in his passion and resurrection.

Today, the feast day of All Souls speaks to us powerfully on at least two levels. Firstly we recall those who did the ordinary things of the Christian life unobtrusively and with little or no public acclaim, but to whom we are thankful in helping us to see differently, in stimulating our religious imagination.

And secondly, that very act of remembering with joy and thanksgiving is the fruit of that religious imagination. For in being able to remember those who we love and have lost we are seeing differently – we are seeing and experiencing simultaneously the truth of what is and the truth of what might be.

When bringing to mind our loved ones today what is, is the reality of loss – a grief and a pain that does not diminish with time, a longing that they might be here with us now. What might be is the reality that even in the loss, the reality of relationship with those who have passed beyond the grave is as strong and binding as ever was, indeed stronger. What might be is the reality of the words we hear in the Eucharistic prayer that we celebrate this feast of the kingdom in the presence of angels, archangels and all God's faithful people; and that presence with us today is as real as God himself made real among us in the ordinary stuff of broken bread and a cup of wine.

Jesus himself never used the term "religious imagination"; he doesn't use the words "to see simultaneously what is and what might be"; yet it's there in his response to the stilted attempts at questions that were possibly first century Palestine's equivalent of bendy bus ads. It's there in his response to the Sadducees who come to him and pose the question about the woman who married seven brothers who each died and ask "whose wife will she be in the resurrection?" And it's there time after time in John's Gospel in a whole series of encounters that penetrate into the heart of all our questions about life and death. In chapter 6 of John's Gospel, part of which we heard earlier, Jesus places himself and his life and death and resurrection at the heart of that new and often less obvious reality. "I am the bread of life", those who eat of this bread will live for ever."

And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.

Today we remember and we pray for those parted from us by this thing we know as death, in the belief that it matters; in the belief that this thing called prayer which forms us and shapes us has a reality both here and in whatever lies beyond the grave – in what is and what might be; in the belief that nothing of our relationship with those parted from us is lost in death, but is transformed and renewed and purified in this indescribable thing we call resurrection; in the belief that what we can see and what are yet to see of God's purpose for us is a cause for hope and rejoicing.

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