

A Hunger for God

Do you remember the first of these sermons on Liberal Christianity? I said that I often asked questions in my sermons but didn't often give answers. I then gave some answers. The first positive answer I gave was **God exists**. Two simple words but it is going to be on these two words that I will base this sermon. Not that we will debate whether God exists or not but rather aspects about God.

Believers and non-believers tend to take two opposite sides when discussing God. Believers state categorically that God exists and non-believers state categorically that God doesn't exist. Today as we enter this discussion on God I'm not even going to debate whether God exists or not. I'm taken as a given that answer I gave two Sundays ago – God exists.

But how do we know that God exists? Well, as I said last week, the bible, the scriptures, tell us the nature of God and tell us the story of salvation. The Bible begins with the confident statement 'In the beginning God...' It is saying that God created the Heavens and the earth. This is also a controversial discussion point. Now, Liberal Christians and many other people have a hunch that that is true, but not in the way the Bible describes. Astro-physicists now claim that the universe began with a 'Big Bang' 15 billion years ago and that our planet Earth is 4.55 billion years old. When we talk in these 'billion year' terms we perhaps lose perspective. I can say that 15 billion years is an immense length of time and what the Bible sees as the creation is a very small part of it. For example - if we think of the age of the universe as a single hour then intelligent life has only existed for a few seconds and people having the ideas of God for just a fraction of a second. During that fraction of a second peoples' opinion of God has gone up and down and this can be seen in Christianity from its rise in the West to the philosopher Karl Nietzsche's claiming that 'God is dead' in the last century.

What is surprising is that in spite of the arrogant self-confidence induced by science and technology, and the disillusionment with the idea of moral progress caused by the terrible wars of the 20th century, 90% of the people of the United States of America, 67% of the British and 65% of the South African population say that they believe in God. However, a much smaller number actually belong to a church or faith community.

So what do we mean when we say we believe in God? A typical answer would be along the lines that God is creator, or God is divine goodness, love, justice and truth. These, of course, are values that most of us admire and aspire to and we believe that they can bring meaning and purpose to our lives. It is natural for us humans to crave meaning and purpose in life and this motivates our search for God. We must remember that us Christians believe that creation by God is not a once off event but is an ongoing process. We share in God's work of creation through the procreation of children, through art, music and literature, and whenever we build up a relationship through love, kindness, and self-giving.

But those who say they believe in God are almost certainly saying more than that there are values they admire and aspire to. There is also a belief that those values exist in some sense beyond us, that they have a reality independent of our imperfect and untidy lives. I have often wondered why non-regular church-goers want their children baptised. Generally, they want their children to learn how to live a Christian life and then to 'choose for themselves when they grow up'. By 'Christian life' they mean a morally good life, a life of decent citizenship, that hopefully would make their children both pleasant and successful. Such an attitude is a half way house on the journey to belief in God. It is belief, as you might say, 'in Good' rather than 'in God'.

Now one of the big issues that always crop up when we talk about God is how can God allow good people to suffer. Perhaps the book of Job gives us some answers. Job was a pious and wealthy Jew who had his faith tested by bankruptcy, pustular skin diseases, and so called 'comforters' who insisted that his extreme suffering must have been brought about by extreme evil on his part - which wasn't true. Have a look at this wonderfully poetic & philosophical book. The writer has given God some wonderful lines. God's voice comes out of a whirlwind. 'Job, where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding ... Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades, or loose Orion's belt? Can you draw out Leviathan with a fishhook, or press down its tongue with a cord?' Job, needless to say was simply overwhelmed by the awesome majesty and power of God. Hearing this poetry Job had no alternative but to repent. His life takes a new direction and he comes not to resent his trials but to look at life through God's eyes.

Now all this indicates God's otherness. I'm sure that when we think about God we think instinctively of God's greatness, majesty and almightiness first and this induces awesomeness and fear. This is a long way from some tame, suburban God who is concerned with good manners and good citizenship.

One could ask, what's the point of having a God if that God doesn't stretch beyond everything that we know and understand and make demands beyond what we are initially prepared to give? After all God must be God!

The 90% Americans 67% UK citizens and 65% South Africans who claim to believe in God are expressing a natural hunger for this transcendence, this otherness. But how is that hunger to be satisfied? The problem with transcendence is that it is, almost by definition, inaccessible. Not only does God seem distant and other, so are those values I spoke about earlier. We often find truth and quality of life elusive, just out of reach, just beyond us and we need to find ways of getting in touch. For some people getting in touch with God, is achieved by listening to live music, reading, or walking in beautiful countryside, or by watching films or going to the theatre. The job of artists and writers is to make revelations and to show us things about reality that we hadn't previously seen for ourselves and bring them closer. But the arts tends to be a minority interest and for some it is expensive and elitist.

Brian Mountford in his book points to the example of the death of Princess Diana. In the week following the death of Diana the public spent 25 million pounds on flowers to lay at her shrines, compared with an average annual expenditure at florists in Britain of 35 million pounds. Why should so many thousands of people lay flowers, send messages and join in the mourning when they didn't know her. Brian Mountford sees this as evidence of mass spiritual searching. It was an event that evoked sympathy and self-identity - Diana had famously suffered, she was young and beautiful and her death was dramatic. This was an event that changed the public mood, pulled people up in their tracks, and forced a kind of religious question, what are we here for and what is life about? The ritual of laying flowers in vast numbers at Buckingham Palace was a way of seeking a language in which to express spiritual hunger, asking, "What can I say? What can I do?" People recognise the need for expiation, repentance, forgiveness and hope. We ask how do we learn from this; how can we do better in the future? How can we centre our minds on the things that really matter in life?

Last week I said that the bible was essential because it presented a revelation about God and tells us about salvation. The important thing about God in the Bible is that God is seen as personal, not a God of ideas alone, but a God who enters relationships with people and influences their lives. It is the main theme of the Old Testament, which describes the developing relationship between God and God's chosen people. But the Old Testament God is only halfway personal. This is a God who appears on mountain tops, who speaks from clouds or in dreams, who is like a king, a judge, or a shepherd, who can be intensely present in holy places, but in the end is always awesome and perhaps a bit frightening. If God is to be truly personal God has to be expressed in a far more intimate way than a voice in a whirlwind. This is where the New Testament takes over. **God becomes man.** The eternal creator enters human history in the form of Jesus of Nazareth, a first-century Jew living in Palestine, which I'll talk about at our single service at 9am next Sunday morning.

Finally, there is another idea of God that some find helpful and which I'd like to mention. It was suggested by Paul when he addressed the philosophers in Athens. Paul said that although people grope to find God, God is not far away, for 'in him we live and move and have our being' Paul said. This presents God as a sustaining personal environment in whom we can live and move and have our being, rather than an external source of goodness and creative power that has to be tapped into. The positive side of this idea is that it prevents dualism – thinking of God as distant and transcendent, God up there and us down here. God is described in theology as being transcendent but also as immanent. Immanent means close to us. So this idea of us being part of God presents a more unified view of the relationship, but it does raise the obvious difficulty that, if we think of God as a kind of medium for life, as water is the medium for fish, why do some people aspire to connect with God and others don't. If we are all part of God, then presumably we would all be influenced by godly qualities. But clearly this is not the case, but some view this idea of being part of God as an additional and helpful metaphor for an understanding of God. This idea is also an indictment on us, because if we **are** part of God what are we doing to change other people's lack of godly qualities. Isn't this after all part of Church's role today?