

Christ Church 4th Feb 2018

Lectionary: Proverbs 8: 1, 22-31. John 1:1-14

'The Word became flesh'

This morning I'm going to ask you some questions about our faith. I will be suggesting some answers too.

The other day Caroline asked me if I had a favourite grandchild. I had to think long and hard about this, and provide a truthful answer – which was “No, I don't have a favourite grandchild. I love them all equally”. That did *not* mean that I approved of all their behaviour equally! And so to my first question:

1. Does God have favourites? Does God prefer Jews to Gentiles? Believers to unbelievers? Christians to Muslims or Buddhists?

An early answer in the Hebrew Bible (from Exodus to 2 Chronicles) is YES. God has a chosen people – the Israelites – a tiny nation of believers in a sprawling ancient world of pagans. Some Christians still think along these lines. There is an 'elect' – a chosen few who will bear witness to their faith in the hope of heavenly reward, while the great majority of people will perish everlastingly.

A better answer is NO: God has no favourites. Since nothing and no-one exists unless God brings it into being, and since God loves all that God has made, and since all humanity is represented to God by Jesus, God has no favourites. The Bible knows nothing of Hindus, Buddhists or Muslims. The only religious difference is between Jews and non-Jews (i.e., Gentiles), and that difference has been removed by Jesus Christ.

2. Does God have a partner? Is the answer NO? There is only one God, not more than one. Yet today's OT reading is one of the most neglected in the whole Bible. Preachers are understandably afraid of it. It says God *does* have a partner. And that partner is *female*. She is called Sophia, or Wisdom. She speaks for herself in Proverbs 8, and in today's reading we learn more about her. She was made before everything else –

before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth... When he established the heavens, I was there'.

I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.

The Book of Proverbs belongs to a time before Christ when some of the 'chosen people' began to think that God has a purpose for everyone and everything – not just for the Promised Land and the People of the Law. And in picture language, they spoke of God making Lady Wisdom before everything else. She was 'daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race'. It is the whole human race that is God's concern and in which God delights. So the sages (the people who wrote Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, some of the Psalms, and some of the biblical book that Protestants call 'the Apocrypha') depicted God sharing the divine plan with

another, before all things. The world is made in a thoughtful loving way so that everyone can know something of its Creator whether they are Jews or not. Whenever I see any beautiful scene or powerful work of art, I like to think of Sophia, because She is why we can know and appreciate such things.

3. Do only Christians know Jesus? The usual answer to this is YES. Jesus is the light of the world, and the world is in darkness. But today's reading says *otherwise*. John says 'In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it' (Jn 1: 4-5). 'The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world'. Like Lady Wisdom who 'delights in the human race', the light of the world is in the world already and the darkness has not overcome it. John knows that before anyone believes in Jesus Christ, Jesus is already in the world, the source of all moral goodness and kindness, the One who loves all, who enables us to do good things and make right moral decisions. Whereas the Old Testament speaks of God's Wisdom, the New Testament speaks of God's Word. Don't you wish Christian evangelism emphasised the goodness already within people, and urged people to respond to the Christ who is already there, in the world, and in them? That is not to say we do not need to repent of our wrongdoing. We still need to 'receive him', to 'believe in his name', says John, in order to become children of God. So, YES, Christians *do* have a knowledge of God which is unique to them.

4. Should Christians love, or hate, the world? The answer is: the New Testament has at least two meanings for the word 'world', and we are to love one, and shun the other. The New Testament Letters think of the world as a domain of war and exploitation, of selfishness, of cruel power and lack of freedom. 'Keep yourselves untarnished from the world', says the apostle James. But John says something different about the world. In John we read 'God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son...' So if God loves the world so much, we must love it too. Here the world means what we call 'the environment'. It means the world of people with their needs, instead of their sins. It is a bad mistake to confuse these worlds.

5. Should Christians love or hate 'the flesh'? The usual answer is that the flesh is a domain of temptation, indeed of deadly sins like greed, lust, to be avoided at all costs. But perhaps the most important theological verse in the New Testament was read this morning, and it takes a different line. The flesh is something so good, so positive, that the Word can become *it*. 'And the Word became flesh and lived among us'. God takes on our flesh and blood. That's what the word 'incarnation' means. God lived in that flesh – the flesh of Jesus – and through it showed us who and what God is. Because God is present in flesh, God is alongside us as brother, sister, companion, friend.

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