

On Tuesday I took a small group of trainee priest to Southwark – we went to have a training session with Diocesan Registrar and afterwards we went to Evensong in Southwark Cathedral. While we were a small group – our experience of worship was quite diverse, and so two of the students at the end of the service had a lot of interesting questions about the service as it was not something they had experienced before. It led to a very interesting discussion about how we worship, and how God experiences our worship.

The image of God which is often focused on from our Gospel reading today is one of a harsh and judgemental king – but it's not only image. There is also a God who trusts those who are his servants, or a God who provides gives to be used are also evident.

If we think about the way we view people, particularly people in authority, it often has as much to do with our own competencies and insecurities as it does theirs. This is also the case when we describe and talk about God. So much of how we describe or interpret, or even describe God to others reflects our perceptions.

Often when I talk to people about how they are going with God I often find that people do not believe that God will forgive them. When you dig, this is often because that person finds it hard to forgive others, or it can be that they find it hard to forgive themselves.

Equally often those who cannot believe God loves them find it hard to allow others to love them too, or for them to love any one – or to even love themselves.

Neither of these things I think are particularly surprising – but what is becoming more common and has surprised me quite a lot is how pragmatism also influences how we see God. Our generation, particularly in the west, like to be able to control every aspect of our lives, we like things to have a practical application. We do not like uncertainty and we work hard at creating realities that have a level of control. Because of this we expect God to behave in the same way – but God doesn't! Faith is not about logic or pragmatism – faith is about belief and trust – two things which are very hard to control.

In our Gospel reading the focus seems to be on the 3<sup>rd</sup> servant – the one who is fearful and gives rise to this image of an 'angry' God. But this story is not our context or our reality. It is set in a time when servants were the hands of those who owned them – not an understanding of employment or economy that we are used too. Also, as one theologian pointed out for me during the week – we need to assess our own motives in siding with the 3<sup>rd</sup> servant – why is it that he feels that his master is harsh? Well we may never know that answer to this question – but it is interesting that he is the only one that feels that way.

If we look at the text as a whole we notice that

- 1) Neither of the other two servants felt such fear, even though they were entrusted with significantly more (and therefore had more to lose).
- 2) The landowner gives them considerable sums to invest and then only comes back “after a long time” – that’s trust!
- 3) The landowner rejoices in the success of the first two servants – “Well done! Enter into the joy of your master!”
- 4) Notice that he responds to his servant’s assessment with a question, “You knew, did you?,” calling that assessment into doubt and, perhaps, expressing his indignation at that portrayal, which might explain his reaction, as he deals with the servant according to the servants (mis)characterization<sup>1</sup>.

David Lose suggests that in view of this – maybe the point of the story is about how we see God, rather than about the way that a ‘fearful’ servant might behave!

Often this parable has been read either as a warning against laziness in light of the landowner’s (God’s/Christ’s) eventual return or as an exhortation to be actively preparing for the day of reckoning when all accounts will be settled. But maybe that is not the point – maybe instead this might be a warning about how we picture God. About how we imagine God wants to interact with us. About how we assess God’s character interactions with us.<sup>2</sup>

I found this a really interesting point to consider as we come to the end of Kingdom season and move towards Advent – a period of the year which has traditionally focused on being prepared and ready for the coming of Christ – and as we heard last week – making the most of the gifts God has given us in the time that we have available. But maybe the point of Kingdom Season is not about what we are doing – but what we are seeing and being – how we think and pray and promote our relationship with God. Maybe it is a time when we should think about the baggage we place on God, the unrealistic expectations maybe we have of our faith, or even ourselves.

On Thursday as many of you know 6 primary schools from our local area visited us, as we hosted the inter faith week story telling event. It was quite an amazing day – and through the process of telling a story to successive groups of children during the day I noticed a couple of things. I was telling a story about a little boy called Wilfred who helped a person lived in the nursing home next door to his house find her memories – as she told him stories. One of the reasons I had chosen to tell this story was that it is a story about what we notice about people – and how we value them. Wilfred – who is about 5 – visits his neighbours each day and gets to know them – but he doesn’t just know their names – he remembers things that they tell him and

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/11/pentecost-24-a-wysiwig/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/11/pentecost-24-a-wysiwig/>

things about them. He knew that Mr Tippet was crazy about cricket; and he would take time to listen to Mrs Jordan who was good at playing the organ. After the story we explored with our young visitors how they know that people respect them – and how being listened too and also that people remember what you have told them was very important. We talked about what it felt like to each of us when we were respected – but also how others behaved or we behave when we show respect.

The day in many ways was about the power of noticing each other – but also noticing what is going on for us when we are talking to others.

It made me wonder about the third servant in the story – why did he feel fearful of the landowner? Why was he frightened of the gift he was given and the task he had been set. Similarly – what gave the other two servants confidence to act?

It made me wonder about our relationships with God – what makes us fearful of God – and for someone of us, what makes us fearful of the concept of God? What frightens us or limits us from fulfilling the gifts which God has given us?

In both the parable and in my experience on Thursday – it is in sharing the story that some of the issues are resolved – taking time to find out what is going on – and also being prepared to change the picture or image of a person or of God.

I wonder what image of God we have, and if that image limits not only our faith – but our ability to respond to God's call. Similarly – how does our image of God enliven us – inspire us – help us to move forward and be all that God has created us to see.

On Friday I was on the Bakerloo line on the way to Northwick Park to visit a parishioner – as we were coming into Wembley just after 3.30 it appeared that the sun was rising above the horizon behind the stadium – it was a bright red ball of fire just above the houses. It was disconcerting. I then looked over my shoulder to see the sun setting and realised that the setting sun was being reflected off a metal roof which was given the appearance that the sun was rising and setting on opposite sides of the train at the same time. It took my brain a few minutes to recover from the distorted view – and the image which I had seen.

So much of what we see – whether with our eyes, or our hearts or even our knowledge informs how we understand ourselves and who God is – and it can often be distorted by other things that are going on around us. I think the challenge of today's reading, as we prepare for Advent is to consider the image of 'God with us' that informs our faith. Maybe for us this year Advent might be a time when we assess our assumptions about God, and dare to see our faith anew. Often it is only when we step back and take time to recalibrate that we can see what it is that God is saying to us clearly. Amen.