

God revealing himself to each of us

A sermon preached by the Revd Viv Bridges on the second Sunday in Epiphany, 17 Jan 2016 in St Peter's Wolvercote. Reading: 1 Corinthians 12.1-11, John 2.1-11 (The wedding at Cana)

On the Feast of the Epiphany, the Vicar preached about the way in which God reveals himself to us in ways that are very specific to us as individuals - 'where we are', as Charles put it: God led those 'wise men' - men who studied the heavens - by a STAR to the new born Christ; Jesus was affirmed as the Son of God to John the Baptist by going to be baptised himself. Not too much of a surprise, then, that Jesus revealed his divinity to guests at a wedding feast by providing copious quantities of excellent wine! We have heard this story many times before, and heard many sermons about it, so I want rather to concentrate on that 'trick' God seems to have of revealing himself to us in a way that seems designed solely for us.

Well - this shouldn't really surprise us! God is everywhere! In everything around us! He 'inhabits', 'energises' our whole world. But we all 'see' our world in different ways, even though it is the same world in front of us. Just as we may all listen to a piece of music or a poem but react in different ways - some be very moved, some not moved at all, some even repelled - even though it is the same music, the same poem. And we may well react in different ways at different times and circumstances in our lives. Many people may know the same person - but ask them to describe that person and it may seem that they are describing totally different people! God, then, is all around, within us, each of us will recognise him in our own way depending on 'who' or 'where' we are (our personalities, our life experiences) and many people won't recognise him at all.

For many people - including many scientists - God is still revealed in the SKIES. The wonders and immensity of the universe or the theories of how our universe was formed (that 'BIG BANG') (or indeed the unimaginable smallness of the particles and processes that make up everything in that vast universe), all seem to point to the extraordinary power and creativity of God. But for other people, greater scientific understanding of these processes seems to prove that God doesn't exist!

God is still revealed to many people through the Church - that motley collection of people who have been baptised into the Body of Christ himself. But many people look at the SAME church, and are appalled, repelled, at some of the things they see: in-fights and wrangling about power, 'doctrine'. The Anglican primates meeting (held this week) won't have helped. Some people may be relieved that a familiar Anglican 'fudge' has prevented a complete breakup of the Communion, but many others will be appalled at the refusal by some members of the church to acknowledge our different sexualities as 'God given', and who therefore inherently condemn any sexuality other than heterosexuality. Many looking at the Church, then, will continue to find it impossible to believe that it can be the body of someone who is supposed to be the incarnation of love.

Many people find God in the joys and celebrations of relationships - including weddings - but others feel that 'enjoying yourself' and 'faith' can't go together, so the fact that Jesus changed water into wine might suggest that he condoned drunkenness.

For St John (the only evangelist who included the miracle of the water turned into wine) everything that Jesus did was a revelation of himself as 'God', and a 'window', if you like, into God's glory. But comparatively few people accepted Jesus, the 'son of Joseph', as the Son of God. Today many people do find Jesus Christ present in the world, perhaps in those people who refuse to put worldly wealth and status before the needs of others, or in those who challenge injustice, or who commit themselves to bringing relief to those in distress. They see Christ in the many occasions of healing (faith healing or the latest medical advances), and some find him in suffering itself - assuring us of God's wish to be with us, and comfort us in suffering. But

others look at the world around us, see the greed, the cruelty, injustice, the overwhelming amount of suffering and cannot see how a loving God could possibly allow all these things to happen.

So God is in the same world that all of us inhabit, and we recognise him in a myriad of different ways - depending on 'who' and 'where' we are - while others don't recognise him at all. And, of course, Jesus knew all about this, he spoke about it in his parable of the sower. God 'sows his seed' everywhere - holds out his hands to everyone - invites us all into relationship with him. Jesus had his explanations for why this seed didn't take root and thrive in everyone, and St Paul hinted at an explanation when he said (in our Epistle reading today) that 'when you were pagans, you were enticed and led astray to idols that could not speak'.

The 'world' holds out too many distracting and more instantly accessible and apparently rewarding invitations. But the rewards don't last for ever - even that £30 million jackpot win won't guarantee everlasting life! But some people may have thought a lot about God's invitation but for some of those reasons I've described above they don't feel they can accept it - there seems to be too much 'evidence' for his NON existence, or if he does exist, he seems to be a cruel, vengeful God.

BUT - things can change. Sometimes God does something fairly spectacular (look at St Paul) to make his presence felt, something that simply can't be avoided, and so opens up someone's heart and mind to his presence. Sometimes people recognise God for the first time when they go through a time of difficulty or suffering. They suddenly realise that there was 'something', some sort of guiding and supporting presence throughout that time of difficulty. But for many people God is 'revealed' in many small, almost insignificant ways that gradually build up to a very real recognition of his presence. When any of these or similar things happen, when we see God revealed to us and respond to him, then we begin our life of prayer. And we have to respond in our own individual way, for this is surely why God reveals himself to us where we are. It's no use trying to be something we're not.

There can be a tendency to think that we all have to be 'good' at one particular form of prayer - contemplation, meditation, Ignatian, Bible study.. But if we experience God walking in creation, looking up at the skies, carrying out a scientific experiment, watching film versions of the Gospels, by being a good neighbour ... so many different ways ... then that is surely how he wants us to continue to seek him out, to respond to him. Of course taking time to try other ways of praying can deepen our relationship with him, but God surely works in us most deeply and fully if we are able to discern and acknowledge our own true gifts and inclinations.

Once again St Paul understood this. He said that the Holy Spirit allots particular gifts, skills, to each one of us individually. So if our gifts lie in 'the utterance of knowledge' we can't expect to be very good at 'healing'. If our gifts are for humble service to others, we probably won't be very good at 'the interpretation of tongues'. Yes - I know there are some people who seem to be good at everything! But on the whole, we have specific inclinations, talents, and God affirms that by being revealed to us in our own specific way.

When we do accept our particular gifts and offer them to God then some amazing things happen. Once again St Paul! We find that the Spirit 'activates' all of those gifts, works in us, transforms us, we become more truly ourselves. The Spirit makes the most of our gifts in a way that most benefits the world around us.

When we allow God to reveal himself to us as we are, where we are, and when we respond to him, offering all that we truly are, then our relationship with him grows and deepens. We come to know him as a God who loves deeply and unconditionally, and we are transformed by his grace so that the light of God's glory can shine in the world today - even through us!

Amen.