

Easter 6 2020

The advent of the Corona virus has held a mirror up to our society, a mirror that has had the effect of magnifying both the best and the worst in the human beings and human systems that make it up.

The bad stuff exemplified by scammers, thieves who steal PPE, drug traffickers, and political opportunists reminds us that we are sinners. But what about the good stuff – the bravery and self-sacrifice of frontline staff, the numberless acts of kindness, the army of volunteers, the ingenuity and flexibility of those who have re-purposed their businesses to provide medical equipment, the young people signing up to train as health and social care professionals? What does that tell us?

Well, in the light of our first reading - Paul's speech to the Athenians on the Areopagus - we are likely to conclude that this stuff tells us that we are made in the image of God.

Remember that in Genesis 1 God says:

"Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; ..."So God created humankind in his image,

in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

We might say that this means that we are stamped with the Creator's trademark or – like a stick of rock – that we have the divine name running all through us. But Paul is saying something more in his speech. He is talking to the Greek chattering classes so he connects with them by drawing on two of their own poets: Epimenides and Aratus. Epimenides was a Cretan who lived 7 centuries before Jesus and wrote of the one they knew as Zeus 'in him we live and move and have our being'; and Aratus was a Macedonian poet who lived 3 centuries before Jesus and penned these lines:

From Zeus let us begin; ...full of Zeus are all the streets and all the market-places of men; full is the sea and the havens thereof; always we all have need of Zeus. For we are also his offspring;

'For we are also his offspring'. Paul cleverly seizes on this line to make a key point: human beings do not simply bear the

mark of God, we are God's children – being made in the image of God is about family resemblance.

And this is Paul's central point, we are created for a relationship with God - and it's not the kind of relationship that we might have with an object but with a person like ourselves.

Of course telling the difference between persons and objects can be difficult. The Athenians had built many statues in the public squares. These may have been beautiful and valuable but they were not people; yet they seemed to treat them as if they were. On the other hand it is very easy to treat people as if they were objects: this is done in obvious ways in modern day slavery and the sex industry – and of course the two are linked. But in more subtle ways it is possible for us to use people for our own ends, and even to create and craft them in our own image, to project our desires and fears on to them, to blame them for our faults, to admire them insofar as they reflect our glory. Some people enslave their own children psychologically in this way, but thinkers like Sigmund Freud and Rene Girard have pointed out that we are all prone to this.

And we can approach God this way too, creating someone who will give us our heart's desire or someone rather like ourselves. The Jesuit scholar George Tyrrell once said that the quest for the real Jesus behind 2,000 years of church history is like peering into a dark well and finding your own face at the bottom reflected back at you.

Perhaps we do this because we assume that God is unknowable: the mysterious transcendent, wholly other, unknown God. So we fall back on idols: half-baked reconstructions, dry philosophical arguments, wishful fantasies, and projections, even empty religion. Or we take the more honest road of agnosticism.

But this is where Paul breaks in with his bold and astonishing claim, 'What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.'

God can be known: we only need to reach out, to grope and he is waiting to take our hand, for Paul says, 'he is not far from each one of us.' What we thought was beyond our grasp has reached out to touch us; what we thought transcendent is in fact immanent. In the words of Jesus, 'The kingdom of God

has drawn near.’ And it has drawn near in the person of Jesus, as two people discovered on that first Easter Sunday as they walked to Emmaus.

This one who draws near is a stranger. (Just before our reading begins the Athenians say of Paul’s teaching ‘It sounds rather strange to us.’); and precisely because Jesus is strange and somewhat mercurial he resists our attempts at projection and our attempts to assign him to box and shut the lid (You’ll recall that they tried that on Good Friday and it didn’t work).

He is who he is, and as such he enables us to love. For all genuine love relationships begin with seeing the other not as belonging to us but as his or her own person.

Yet Jesus is an oddly familiar stranger because he is also our brother, the offspring of the living God. He is familiar because he is family. Our recognition of Jesus comes through the remembrance, however faint, that we too are God’s children. We are drawn to Jesus because we are made in God’s image, and this movement, coming from a kind of homing instinct, is what the Bible describes as *metanoia* – the change of direction that leads to faith.

The homing instinct is there in all of us whatever our background and culture – a deep-seated intuitive tendency to grope for God.

It’s an instinct that seems to come to life in critical situations, and we’ve seen evidence of it during the present crisis – with at least two surveys showing an increase in virtual church attendance, prayer and spiritual practices, and an openness to belief in God and life beyond death, particularly in young adults. This should not be dismissed but treasured and nurtured as the stirrings of faith in those created in God’s image; and we as churches need urgently to work out how we might do this.

But there is something else at work, not so much about creation but redemption. For in and because of Jesus human beings are raised up to our full stature, are able to remember who we are and begin to live up to it. Paul is very clear at the end of his speech that Jesus is a man – a human being who has been raised from the dead. In his first letter to the Corinthians he says something similar:

For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being;

Today here are stirrings of resurrection life all around us, of people doing things they never thought possible, going beyond what they and we thought were the limits of human sacrificial love, showing what one eminent researcher describes as 'a psychology of rising to the occasion.' We need to see this too for what it is – being raised with Christ, and to celebrate it as such.

Here are two ways of speaking about God at times of human crisis and fear. They are two sides of the same coin, but they are very different in tone. The first is the preaching of John the Baptist that goes something like this:

You're all rotten – like a nest of snakes crawling on your bellies - and if you don't change PDQ you'll be dead. You think I'm tough? Just you wait there's someone coming after me who will rain fire on you.

The second is Paul's speech in Athens:

You're half-way there. God is your father and wants to have a relationship with you. There is going to be a judgment but you can trust that it will be fair because the judge is a human being like you. He's passed through death – and has raised up the human race so that we can stand tall and dare to look ourselves and God in the eye.

I wonder which one speaks more powerfully to you? I wonder which one you think would be more effective in drawing people to Jesus and in keeping them close to him? And I wonder how you would speak that message to yourself and to others in the weeks and months ahead?