

anticipation
a sermon preached on the
seventeenth sunday after pentecost
11 September 2016
at
st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
by *fr david moore, vicar*

the lections: Exodus 32:7-14; Psalm 51:1-10, 1 Timothy 1:1-2,12-19a, Luke 15:1-13

Searching and seeking is the work of the longing heart. In her search for a single coin, a woman sweeps the house and lights the lamp. In his search for just one of his one hundred sheep, a man ventures out into the wilderness. Searching and seeking is rewarded with finding. Rejoicing is the climax! Joy is the goal!

This is God's way of 'watching' us, says Jesus in the parables. It is how God *sees* us. Jesus offers us this vision of God and of ourselves, as fundamentally loved, as objects of the lover's searching and seeking, a Lover whose desire for us is fulfilled in rejoicing. Any person who has fallen in love understands this. Any parent – except of course those who are themselves so smashed and disfigured as to be incapable – can identify with this ache of the heart.

This morning I want to explore this 'ache of the heart', reflecting on our Christian inheritance, the reality of the prevailing scientific view of our time, and, hopefully, coming to a third position in due course. For Christian proclamation must have one eye on Scripture, and one eye on the unfolding universe.

The now-dominant view prevailing in science is that everything is reducible to parts, that all things are explained by returning to the first moment, and the smallest particles, to the 'Big Bang' the primal moment, and tiniest building blocks of life and the universe. This is a metaphysics of archaeology – of a relentless digging into the past in order to explain the workings of the present.

But in this archaeological vision there is, paradoxically, no place for subjectivity – no room, in fact, for you and me. Everything is reduced to object: there are only lifeless, inanimate bits. There is no consciousness, no psyche. There is no purpose: just blind causal steps which result from mere chance.

In this archaeological vision, not only God is denied, but also human freedom, for everything is simply determined by eternally fixed laws. Human consciousness cannot be explained: and indeed is regarded as something of a mirage, a mere accident of evolution, a random chance without meaning or purpose. Everything is mere chance, without reason. Indeed, there is no purpose to life.

The so-called 'new atheists' are the well-published celebrities of this reductive materialism. But, sadly, most physical scientists now believe in this metaphysics of materialism – though of course they don't own up to the fact that it is a belief, an ideological commitment.

It is perhaps one of the great ironies of our time that a science of metaphysical materialism not only cannot explain the meaning of mind, of consciousness, it even concludes that mind-consciousness cannot be proved to exist, because it cannot be reduced to measurable bits. Yet if that is true, then the logical conclusion would be that the subjective pronouncements of scientists who speak so confidently could have no validity!

An archaeological metaphysics cannot explain this woman who searches her house. It cannot make sense of this man who leaves the ninety-nine, places himself in danger, in search of the one. Nor can it explain the joy of finding.

The rise of this dismal vision of humanity – and indeed all creation – is a child of the so-called 'enlightenment', but also a child of the vision it reacted against, that is, the church's vision of an eternal and changeless perfection. Though not in fact a biblical vision – (I'll come to this in a moment) – sadly the church was so affected by Plato's ideas about the perfect, eternal, timeless now, that Christian theology could be said to have been somewhat hijacked by it. Hymns like 'Immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes', and our Anglican Article One's God 'without body, parts or passions',¹ are part of a thoroughgoing vision which

¹ The Standing Committee of the General Synod of the Church of England in Australia, *An Australian Prayer Book*, Sydney: Anglican Information Office, 1978, p627.

views temporal and earthly reality as a merely imperfect analogy of a timeless, changeless, supernatural perfection.

All things 'here below' – the cosmology of countless hymns and prayers – are regarded as deficient. An original perfection exists only in God, and therefore humankind must be originally sinful. This sponsors an obsession with sin and shame, and the expiation fixation required to get rid of these. Human life, work, effort and creativity are therefore ultimately irrelevant. Life is merely preparation for 'heaven'. The aim for the Christian is to endure this present time in such a way as to be acceptable for entry into the eternal fixed order. Hope is otherworldly delayed gratification.

So whereas the dominant scientific vision is archaeological – fixated on the past, driven to find the earliest and smallest units – the church has promoted a vision of an eternal present, a timeless 'now' of a perfect, complete, and unchanging God without body, parts or passions. It should have been obvious to us that this is fundamentally anti-Incarnational.

Paradoxically, both visions sponsor, each in their own manner, a withdrawal from the world, a despising of the flesh and conscious subjectivity – and, as we see, Mother Earth herself.

But in a post-Darwinian world it is clear that the church's vision of a perfect-complete God and an eternal now simply makes no sense. We cannot go backwards; we cannot un-know what we now know. If the scientists' archaeological vision leads to purposelessness and meaninglessness, the church's eternal-timeless-now vision is both nonsensical and irrelevant in an evolutionary universe, as well deprecating of flesh, matter, and psyche.

And in fact – as I mentioned earlier – the eternal-now vision which the church has promoted is not even biblical, but Platonic. The biblical story of Abraham reveals a metaphysics of being drawn by a future. Abraham is called neither to return to an idealised past, nor to perfection in an eternal now, but to take the risk of going where he cannot yet see. "God comes to meet and redeem the world from out of the future,"² who searches him out, and who Abraham is invited to trust.

The biblical vision is in fact an *anticipatory* vision. As I have mentioned on other occasions, it's a metaphysics of the future: all Christian theology is eschatology. The universe hangs together not from behind, but is drawn forward by the 'up ahead'. The world's intelligibility is not discovered by breaking things down in an archaeological or atomistic way, nor by escaping from it to an imagined perfect now, but by being open to its fulfilment which we cannot yet see.

Now lest all this might seem like a problem for specialists, in fact this has immense implications for the church's mission. This is a truly evangelical issue – increasingly pressing in our time. For not only 'specialists' but all the baptised are being called to articulate 'good news' for an evolving universe.

It is surely a matter of time before the meaninglessness and purposelessness of the materialist-archaeological vision so drives people to depression. But in an evolutionary universe it is simply impossible to go backwards, to the church's 'escape hatch' theology – keeping oneself 'nice' against the backdrop of the irrelevance of the world and human effort, so as to fly away at death to a perfect eternal-now with a changeless, passionless god.

What's so desperately needed, then, are Christians whose proclamation is neither archaeological, nor eternal-perfect-now, but anticipatory, a coherent biblical theology of the aching Divine Heart who searches us out.

Both the shepherd and the woman express the hope of anticipation; a future, an 'up ahead', who draws them, an unfolding, an on-going incarnation that was never perfect and complete, a Divine Heart who seeks for yet more, and whose goal is joy and rejoicing. As we have sung this morning:

As thy new horizons beckon,
Father, give us strength to be
children of creative purpose;
thinking thy thoughts after thee,
till our dreams are rich with meaning,
each endeavour, thy design:
great Creator, lead us onward
till our work is one with thine.³

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² John F Haught, *Resting on the Future: Catholic Theology for an Unfinished Universe*, London: Bloomsbury, 2015, pp61-2.

³ Catherine Cameron, 'God who stretched the spangled heavens', © Hope Publishing Company