

Chester Cathedral 31 May 2015 (Trinity Sunday)

Isaiah 6.1-8; John 3.1-7

Any visitor entering Chester Cathedral or logging on to its website will be struck by publicity for the two leading attractions for the summer: the Cathedral at Height tour and the project to build a replica of the Cathedral out of Lego.

I'm intrigued by the juxtaposition of the two. On the one hand, a tour whose selling-point is the vast spread of history and a panoramic spectacle extending, we are told, over five counties. On the other, an activity which invites the visitor to 'Explore cathedral life *in miniature* and learn all about our ... history as we retell our story, *brick by brick*, from the very beginning.' (from the website). Two very different prospects then: the expansive, overarching vision – promising the bird's-eye view, or even the god's-eye view – and the hands-on task that builds, painstakingly, brick by brick, from the ground up.

I'm sure both programmes will bring in the tourists this summer, but I find myself wondering further about their deeper – theological – meaning. It's always important for the Church to think about the ways it relates to the wider world, and how it is perceived by outsiders: its people, its buildings, its worship – not least through the kind of language it uses to communicate about its understanding of God. And today, as the Church

celebrates one of its great festivals, of Trinity Sunday, we cannot help but think about the nature of our understanding of God and the way we articulate that: how we are to conceive of, and communicate with, God. I can't help draw parallels between those two Cathedral attractions, and the different approaches they represent of our perceptions of the world and of God. What is our talk about God intended to do? Does it lift our eyes to the heavens, to focus on higher things, elevated far above the messiness of everyday life? Or does it emerge from the ground level of lived experience, reflecting and articulating human needs and aspirations?

Very often the problem about our talk about God is that it can appear too abstract, unrelated to our everyday experience. It conjures up a God who is impassive and unchanging, manipulating Creation from above, but all the time remaining detached from it. All the more so when it comes to the doctrine of the Trinity, which often seems to turn God into an intellectual puzzle, a product of abstract discourse rather than an immediate and present reality. It also renders theological, or ecclesiastical language, very exclusive and inaccessible, hardly designed to communicate in plain and simple terms something about the nature of God, especially not to an outsider or visitor. It's like some kind of private language, which only makes sense to those already in the know. Rather as if, in visiting the Cathedral at Height, we only allowed admission to a select members-only group (preferably those already fully qualified as steeplejacks or chartered surveyors) and once we'd ascended the tower, we pulled the ladder up after us.

But Trinity Sunday should not be a day for theological abstractions. It is a day for asking whether the ways the Church talks and thinks about God do enable us to learn something about God and the kind of journey of faith we are called to undertake. But although you might expect – as a Practical Theologian – I am normally in favour of the kind of theological language that is relevant and contextual and practical, I'd still want to say that, actually, there are good reasons to value talk about God that retains a sense of otherness, of vision and transcendence. To talk about God as far greater than our ordinary human existence, is a necessary way of putting our own ambitions and self-interest into proper perspective. But to talk about God in that way should not prevent us from being reminded of the way God is constantly breaking into and transforming the mundane and the everyday.

There is always a tension between the God who is beyond human knowing and the God of whom we can speak with confidence and immediacy. Fortunately, the tradition speaks eloquently of this and offers clues for finding a proper balance.

Our reading from the prophet Isaiah is, if you like, the roof-top or “Cathedral at height” version: it originates in a sense of spectacle and awe which here is closely linked to worship. [Our Psalms for the day also express that sense of God’s grandeur and mystery.]

It is significant that this is an experience which engages all the senses: the sound of angelic song, the majestic sight of the temple make this a profound experience. It is something that far exceeds the human capacities not only to apprehend, but also to articulate, the nature of God. It reminds us that if God is truly God, then God exceeds any human words or categories; ultimately, our talk about God ends in silence, contemplation and mystery.

And yet, despite the absolute holiness of God, in the face of something that is ineffable and eternal, the prophet's human consciousness is not undermined. Rather, it is in the very otherness of God that the prophet discovers a deeply moral imperative. Far from being dismissed from the divine presence as unclean, the prophet's experience of such adoration is an invitation to share in God's life and mission – to extend the holiness and majesty of God into everyday life. But to embrace that kind of transformation is always premised on that understanding that the power which sent the prophet is not simply a product of his own imagination but of being caught up in a reality larger than himself.

So the first experience out of which we learn to talk about God is one of **Wonder**. But if it begins in Wonder, I would suggest the second moment is one of an encounter with a God who does not remain ineffable but reaches out to us. And that affords our lives a new kind of value. If our understanding of God is not something we can engineer – much less regulate – then it is not up to us to determine who may or may not be sufficiently deserving to receive God's love. That remains a gift of God alone; and despite many

centuries of the Church trying to make people earn their salvation, or trying to draw a line between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' recipients of God's love, the message of the Gospel is this: none of us is holy in the way God is holy, none of us is good in the way God is good, but nevertheless we are all forgiven – even before we acknowledge our failings. [Romans]

We might call this experience of the nature of God as a sense of '**Grace**'. It is an initiative which comes from God, and surpasses our own efforts. It means our value as persons is God-given and not earned. It requires us to regard the journey of faith not as some kind of lofty tower or ladder of virtue that we all have to climb. We are not expected to ascend to God's level.

Rather, as it says in today's Gospel reading, it was God who descended to us in order that we might know God. As Christians we believe that God comes to us, reveals Godself to us, supremely in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is 'God with us', he reveals to us the human face of God. But again, it isn't as if anyone has to earn their place within Jesus' community, as if he were some kind of teacher of esoteric conundrums which have to be learned in order to earn your place amongst the elect. No: this was someone whose way to God was through what he was and what he did: his wisdom lay in telling stories, offering healing, forgiving sins, challenging authority - and laying down his life.

But if God's grace is not anything we can earn or influence, it doesn't diminish us or demean us or leave us passive. Just as the prophet glimpsed the Wonder of God as a call to righteousness, so to be called and claimed through God's grace is to be drawn into a world whose pattern, whose purpose, whose moral quality, is far greater than anything we can construct alone. To enter into a relationship with a God who exceeds our human systems of containment or control is to be drawn into a reality that runs according to God's logic and not our own.

So in our Gospel reading, Nicodemus, a prominent teacher and religious leader in his own right, learns the impossibility of rationalising or categorising God. The unconventional behaviour of Jesus disturbs everything he thought he knew about God, and yet he sees in Jesus something so compelling, that it tells him, in spite of everything he's learned, that in this man he is witnessing something new, something radical that speaks about a new way of believing and, by implication, a new way of living too. But again, it's not something that can be calculated or set down as the product of human design: it is as powerful as the elements themselves. When it comes to the life and ministry of Jesus, we see one who revealed the nature of God's love as something that knows no boundaries. But once more, we see that this isn't something that just transfixes us without inviting us, compelling us, to make a response. This is a presence that calls all those who witness it into a new way of seeing and living, and is fulfilled in God's Kingdom of justice and reconciliation.

And if our language about God reflects that sense of Wonder and acceptance of God's Grace, so, thirdly, it inspires in us a sense of **Compassion**. If we acknowledge ourselves as the recipients of God's unconditional love – as profoundly helpless by our own efforts but renewed and uplifted by God's trust in us - then if we are honest, we realise how that process is taking place in everyone else without condition. It challenges us to protest whenever human dignity is diminished; whenever one group of people 'plays God' with the welfare or autonomy of others; whenever we see barriers which exclude or discriminate against those whom the world – but not God – considers less valuable.

Our God-talk tries to express something of the Wonder, Grace and Compassion of God: but it is intended to invite us to share in these divine qualities. To recognise that our apprehension of God is a gift, and not something we can calculate, is to be liberated, since it draws us out of ourselves, and orientates us to a world beyond self-interest and self-justification. But that invitation, to see the world from the heights of God's eye view, as God sees and loves it, is also a call to return to ground level: to participate in the doing of God's will – on earth, as it is in heaven.

AMEN