

Sermon, Parish Eucharist, Sunday 8th February 2015

There is an interesting exchange that occurs more often than you would think when in social conversations people find out what I do. It goes something like this:

‘So what do you do?’

‘I’m training to be a vicar.’

‘Oh, so you’ll believe in God then.’

I used to just reply ‘Yes’ but the conversation was often then just rapidly moved on to something else. Once we’ve established that I’m one of those odd types who still believes in fairy stories about an all powerful man in the sky it would appear that they feel there is little more to say on that particular subject.

So I changed my answer. Now if asked whether I believe in God I reply ‘it depends’. This often shocks people. What is a man of the cloth doing only sometimes believing in God?!? And then I explain that it depends on what is meant by ‘Believe’ and what is meant by ‘God.’

Stephen Fry is, amongst many other things, a public atheist. He was recently asked in an interview what he’d say to God if he met him to which he replied that he would denounce him as being ‘utterly evil, capricious and monstrous’ if he were to exist. This line of argument Stephen Fry is taking is not original to him. It is what is known as the theodicy problem; if God is all powerful and knows everything and evil things exist then God cannot be perfectly good.

The Reverend Canon Giles Fraser, a public Christian, ethicist, broadcaster and columnist as well as being the vicar of the South London parish of St Mary’s Newington in his spare time wrote an excellent response to Fry’s comments, which I would commend to people to find online. His piece was titled ‘I don’t believe in the God that Stephen Fry doesn’t believe in either.’

So what we mean by 'God', who we think 'God' is, and what it means to 'believe' is of vital importance when we go out from church and engage with the world. There are all sorts of 'straw man' gods being set up to be knocked down by the world at large. When we talk about God we can't assume that the meaning of the word 'God' is self-explanatory.

Sometimes in my casual social conversation about God the question is subtly changed:

'So you believe God exists then?'

In our society the terms 'true' and 'real' and 'exist' are all held to have roughly the same meaning. Something is true if it real and it is real if it exists. But this logic does not work for God. Does God exist? We'll no, not in the way we talk about 'existence' of anything else. What?!? I hear you cry. Has the curate just said that God doesn't exist?!? Well yes but hear me out. In the triad of truth, reality and existence God is ultimate truth and ultimate reality who brings into existence everything else. God does not exist as such *because* he is that which brings all else into existence.

Let me just say that again to reinforce this point because without it some of what follow may get lost. 'Reality'; being real, is different from 'Existence' when we're talking about God. God who is uncreated has a reality; a realness, which is independent of creation and existence. Because God causes creation and existence he cannot himself be said to exist in the way we think of every other created thing existing.

This brings us to today's readings all of which are about the nature of Christ as being not only the man Jesus but also part of the eternal and supreme reality of God, there at and responsible for creation as all that is brought forth into existence from nothing. John starts his Gospel with the words 'en arche' which we typically translate 'In the beginning'. But there is no definite article in the Greek. There is no 'the' to beginning. We could equally well translate this as 'before the beginning'. John is talking about a reality without the existence of anything. Before anything that is created was created there was God.

And these opening words 'en arche' are the same words as the Greek translation of the opening lines of Genesis. 'In the beginning' is supposed to have us thinking of the creation story from Genesis with the spirit of God hovering over the waters. John equates the Word of God, an integral and eternal part of God's reality, present at creation, as being incarnated in the man Jesus.

The opening lines of John's gospel clearly have resonances with the passage from Proverbs which we've heard. Here the Wisdom of God is there before everything else at the beginning bringing creation into existence. And this passage and the gospel of John were both drawn on in those first centuries as the church struggled towards how they could make the doctrinal statement that Christ is both fully man and fully God. In Christ the eternal reality of God chooses to take on a limited created form to share in our humanity. But taking on a created form does not stop him also being ultimate uncreated reality that is God.

And in the letter to the Colossians which we have heard this morning Paul makes the assertion '*He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*' Christ, the Word of God, the Wisdom of God, is there with God not only in bringing things into existence but also in constantly holding existence together. The created reality in which we exist is wholly dependent on the ultimate reality of God, not only to create it in the first place but to hold it in being at all times. Ours is a lesser created reality dependant on the greater, ultimate, uncreated reality of God.

Sometimes however in my social conversation about God we hit the jackpot:

‘So you believe God is real then.’ And I can say Yes. Wholeheartedly Yes. And the statement ‘I believe God is real’ I think gets us closer to heart of what it is to believe.

We believe in a divine reality which is greater than mere existence and we call that greater ultimate reality ‘God’. And we believe that that reality not only brought all things in our lesser created reality into existence, and sustains all created things in being, but also chose to take on a limited created form and was incarnated in the man Jesus. God is not an uninterested spectator making creation and then watching on from a distance, uninvolved and uncaring. God came and shared in our created reality to show how intimately he is involved with us and cares for us.

That God takes on human form shows what being human really should be. Christ not only shows us what God is like, he also shows us what being human should be like as well. Christ is the incarnated form of God, the ultimate and perfect reality. Therefore Christ is perfect and gives us an example of the perfection we are striving for, even if we know we shall never attain it through our own efforts in this life.

So, I believe that God does not exist as such but is the cause of existence. I believe that real God, became real man demonstrating who God is and what humans should be. I believe we all should be active in telling others about the reality of our God and what the reality of God means in our lives. Other conceptions of gods exist in the world to be believed in or not believed in. But our God is real, *because* he doesn’t merely exist. We can praise and worship Him because he has a reality independent of existence. This is what makes God God.

Amen