St Mark's Church

Living Thinking Faith

'I Believe in God'

A Fresh Look

3 Sermons

by

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Vicar

One

Selfhood

(Genesis 18. 20 – 32 & Luke 11. 1 – 13)

CREDO IN DEUM, 'I believe in God'. The opening words of the Apostles' Creed and possibly the most fundamental affirmation that can be uttered with respect to the divine. But how is it to be understood and is its meaning cast in stone and what does such an affirmation require from those who make it?

I invite you to join me in taking a fresh look at this affirmation to see whether we can find within it a renewed impetus for faith and one that not only reconnects us with its originating impulse in the person of Jesus, but also enables us to engage with other canons of human insight and learning. And we begin with 'I', that is, with selfhood, with what it means for me to be me and you to be you.

Come with me to the previous parish where I served and let me introduce you to Catherine who, at the time of the occasion I'm about to relate, had recently celebrated her 30th birthday - and in great style, I must say!

One of Catherine's life-long companions is Down's Syndrome and, whilst sometimes teasing us with her condition by offering it as an excuse for mischief-making, she had discovered that it needn't prevent her from being truly, authentically, gloriously herself.

From childhood, Catherine had belonged to the congregation of St Michael's, Houghton-le-Spring, which had become for her a 'safe haven' – a climate of forgiveness, acceptance and challenge where, in the company of a wonderfully variegated cross-section of humanity, she found the courage, confidence and capacity to be.

Over the years, Catherine contributed to the common life of St Michael's pretty much as she's wished and the rest of us possessed the imagination and forbearance to accommodate. In addition to assisting in the parish office, serving refreshments at the 'drop-in' for asylum seekers and welcoming those gathering for worship, she was on the reader's rota.

On the Sunday I have in mind, it was Catherine's turn to read the gospel. As it happened, the passage was from Luke, chapter one – the Magnificat, Mary's jubilant song of liberation. Catherine's delivery was measured, precise, in truth, slightly laboured – gathering all of us into a concentrated attention, a waiting on the words, on the Word.

> *My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,*
> *my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour;*
> *he has looked with favour on his lowly servant.*
> *From this day all generations will call me blessed;*
> *the Almighty has done great things for me*
> *and holy is his name.*
> *He has mercy on those who fear him,*
> *from generation to generation.*
> *He has shown strength with his arm*
> *and has scattered the proud in their conceit,*
> *Casting down the mighty from their thrones*
> *and lifting up the lowly.*
> *He has filled the hungry with good things*
> *and sent the rich away empty.*

At the conclusion, Catherine declared, 'This is the Gospel of the Lord'. 'Praise to you, O Christ', came the predicable reply as she exclaimed at the top of her voice 'Yes!' – punching the air with the exuberance of one inhabiting the glorious liberty of the children of God.

Spontaneous applause filled the nave! Few failed to recognise the magnitude of the moment - that on this occasion the Gospel had not only been proclaimed, but performed, indeed, embodied in one whom many would judge disabled.

This story, I think, takes us to the heart of selfhood. It highlights a paradox characterizing the human condition, namely there is a quality of dependence that engenders independence in the sense of freeing persons to be.

Catherine's capacity 'to be' would have been greatly diminished without belonging to a loving family and an hospitable church community. Yet the significance of this observation extends well beyond highlighting the importance of acceptance, affirmation and compassion to a point where Catherine ceases to be a recipient of good will and becomes for us a prophetic spirit, bearing witness to an essential truth about human being – that we need one another to be.

Make no mistake, there is no more vital question than how we perceive ourselves. All else flows from this often unarticulated, but no less visited, preoccupation. If Catherine's dependence is more obvious and pronounced, then she is simply emphasizing what is universally true.

We need others to be. Yet this perception of the self stands in stark contrast to more individualistically-orientated expositions where 'I' exist independently of 'you' and 'you' exist in as much as 'you' exist 'for me'. Here, selfhood becomes a solo occupation, a form of consumerism comparable with acquiring a good education, a decent job or a sun tan. It's something I do for me. You may feature in its realisation, but only as a means to an end.

Equally, 'we need others to be' can become little more than a platitudinous banality unless we are prepared to explore the reaches of this insight, which brings us to our scripture readings. The Gospel includes Luke's rendition of the Lord's Prayer, although we are more familiar with Matthew's fuller version:

> *Father, hallowed be your name.*
> *Your kingdom come.*
> *Give us each day our daily bread.*
> *And forgive us our sins,*
> *for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.*
> *And do not bring us to the time of trial.*

The Lord's Prayer is so named because it is the prayer of Jesus. It is not a prayer we pray to Christ, the eternal Son of God, nor *through* the mediation of his atoning death; rather, it is a prayer Jesus invites us to pray *with him*.

As such, it is an invitation extending well beyond reciting various petitions and sharing certain concerns to inhabiting an identity – a sense of the self that characterised Jesus, animating his life and finding expression through his remarkable ministry.

Significantly, it is an identity rooted in dependence as we acknowledge that our existence is contingent upon the source and sustainer of all life as we know it, one in whom we are encouraged to place our trust. One whose wisdom transcends human invention yet is offered to us as the gift, capable of healing our ills and leading us into integrity and wholeness.

To pray the Lord's Prayer with Jesus is to recognise the limits of our own abilities and to be ready to draw on resources beyond ourselves. It is to realise that we are an integral part of a nexus of relating, a human family to which we belong neither by privilege nor choice and one in which we must learn to live peaceably with our brothers and sisters - those we like and those we don't, those who are familiar and those who seem threatening and strange – through the practice of forgiveness and its economy of grace.

In a sentence, the Lord's Prayer locates each 'I' within a community animated by the convictions, insights and hopes Jesus embodied personally and, ever since, engenders in those who make this prayer their own. To do so is to pursue an awesome vocation. And those who give themselves to it soon begin to discover the extent of our mutual interdependence and enrichment, as well as the capacity of forgiveness to build bridges of reconciliation and peace.

Think of Abraham in our first reading, who participates in the destiny of the inhabitants of two alien cities infamous for wickedness and vice, Sodom and Gomorrah. Repeatedly, he intercedes on their behalf, each time extending the frontiers of forgiveness.

I wonder how broad is the web of relatedness defining our sense of self? Does it extend beyond our family and friends to include, for example, members of our church congregations and those seeking to join them? What about those from whom we are estranged or with whom we disagree? What about those who struggle with poverty, loneliness, depression or addiction or those from other countries seeking asylum in the UK? What about the destitute in Haiti, the starving in Ethiopia, the orphans in Rwanda, prisoners of conscience in the Republic of Congo? Even more so, perpetrators of exploitation, destruction and other forms of inhumanity. What about them?

Have they anything to do with us? How we answer this question depends on our sense of self which, in turn, shapes our response and influences the kind of persons we become.

Both Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu recognised as much and, for this reason, grounded the transition in South Africa from apartheid to democracy within a very particular understanding of human being. One indigenous to the African people, Ubuntu, which can be described in these terms:

> *Ubuntu is a way of being in the world, a means by which we live, work, and relate to one another. Through Ubuntu we recognise and value our common humanity, acknowledging the potential of every single one of us for both good and harm.*
>
> *Ubuntu finds its full expression when we live in harmony, treating one another with the respect and dignity with which we would have them treat us. It also acknowledges that all too often we fall short of that ideal but that to do so need not have irreversible consequences. In Ubuntu there is place for forgiveness and reconciliation, though the process may be long and painful.*
>
> *Ubuntu recognises that no person can exist in isolation but that we are all interdependent through a complex network of relationships. Thus when one person is hurt he does not suffer alone but his pain affects those around him. In a similar way, when one person harms another, the offender loses something of his humanity in the process.*

But when his victim chooses to rise above the temptation for revenge and retaliation, choosing instead the path of forgiveness, then not only do they discover freedom for themselves but they also thereby open the way to their offender discovering a fuller humanity that does not involve harming others.

The principles of Ubuntu are not based on any one religion or creed, and yet are fundamental to all the great religions and humanist movements of our world. By working together across all religious or cultural divides, we can together restore the richness of our humanity and make our nation a safer, healthier, happier place in which to live.

Here is a sense of the self that possesses deep resonances with Jesus' teaching and humanity, revealing something fundamental about human identity and personhood.

And once we come to recognise that and, more so, seek to live by it, then it will transform not only how we see ourselves and one another, but also how we relate to the sacred and divine.

Two

Faith

(Hebrews 11. 1 – 4, 8 – 16 & Luke 18. 35 – 43)

CREDO IN DEUM, 'I believe in God'. This is the second of three sermons on this essential Christian affirmation. In the first, we focused on 'I', that is, on selfhood – on what it means to be a person. We explored how biblical insights invite us to discover our authentic selves within a nexus of relationships of interdependence, before concluding that relationality is not so much something that we do and constitutive of who we are. An insight affirmed indirectly in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity where the ground of all being is dynamic communion between Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

We also recognised that how we see ourselves determines to a large extent how we experience everything else and, in turn, the kind of persons we become. For instance, if we see ourselves principally as consumers, then all that is beyond us exists for our consumption as we set about acquiring knowledge, possessions, relationships, experiences, status, power and so forth.

By contrast, if we see ourselves a relationally-constituted beings belonging within a web of relatedness as expansive as we possess the courage and the imagination to inhabit, that our humanity cannot be defined in individualistic terms, but finds its meaning and fulfilment within the whole. For destinations emerge from the journeys we make. How we set the compass of the self determines what becomes of us.

In this sermon our focus shifts to belief or, more particularly, to faith, for, as we shall see, they are not necessarily coterminous. To gain perspective, come with me to Edinburgh on New Year's Eve 2007 when I found myself waiting for an ambulance. My symptoms had caused the NHS Direct advisor

on the other end of the phone to summon one without delay. Sparing you the details, I was not in a good place medically. Treatment was required as a matter of urgency.

Within minutes, the paramedics were in attendance and I had become a patient – an interesting word defining the estate it conveys. Patient, like patience, derives from the Latin for suffering. To be a patient is to be a sufferer, a dependent, one who is vulnerable to realities beyond our making or control.

Before long, it was clear that immediate intervention was required to stabilize my condition. This would need to be performed by two men in green uniforms with luminous lapels whom I had never seen before. Who were they? Did they know what they were doing? Would they administer the right drugs at the correct dosage? Were they the real thing or a couple of *bon viveurs* en route to a fancy-dress Hogmanay party? These and many other questions flooded my mind, protesting to be answered.

In one sense, they were reasonable enough, but nonetheless totally misplaced. There was no way of knowing in advance. The evidence would only be available afterwards. For the time being, what my predicament demanded on my part was not rational inquiry into these characters probity, but radical trust in their trustworthiness.

Recognition of my vulnerability engendered a readiness to entrust my life into the hands of those paramedics, to surrender myself to a world in which they were willing and able to help me. Only through doing so would I discover whether such a world existed, whether my trust had been well placed. For trusting faith precedes substantial belief and is the grounds for it.

Now this dynamic should not surprise us because the story I've just related simply highlights what characterises personal relating more generally. Trust catalyzes encounter and encounter yields substance, that is, grounds for trust.

Would a friendship ever come into being? Would children ever learn from their seniors? Would a doctor's prescription ever be taken? Would anyone ever climb into a bus or step onto a zebra crossing in a busy street or drink a glass of water from a tap without the priority trust?

The would-be friend may betray us, the parent may mislead the child, the doctor may be hell bent on poisoning us, the bus driver may be a suicide bomber. But there is only one way to find out. Why? Because trust is an inherently risky business, but it is the way we grow as persons through opening up to the liminal world of relating where securities must be transcended so that we are able to encounter the strange otherness of the non-self – presences who are a part of our integrity, yet possess the potential to destroy us or to make us whole.

Quite simply, trust is the currency of encounter, of right-relating, of communion - the motivation of which faith is the application.

In much of the bible, not all, although certainly including Jesus' ministry, faith is not primarily a matter of assenting to certain propositions or convictions, rather it is a personal investment of trust in a particular situation which realises, in some way, what is interpreted to be the will of God.

This is profoundly illustrated in faith's great role of honour recorded in the Epistle to the Hebrews, chapter 11, from which we heard this morning.

It begins with what is probably the only definition of faith to be found in the Scriptures and it is a notoriously difficult verse to translate. The *New Revised Standard Version* offers a subjective rendering, 'Now faith is the *assurance* of things hoped for, the *conviction* of things not seen', whilst the *King James* opts for a more objective reading, 'Now faith is the *substance* of things hoped for, the *evidence* of things not seen'; both are equally valid, semantically.

Let me offer a paraphrase which, I think, captures the author's meaning and certainly resonates with the long list of examples that follows in the text, 'Faith is the means by which we substantiate our hopes by investing ourselves in them.'

And the encomium of faith the author goes on to relate contains the likes of Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, even Rahab the prostitute. All of them remembered and celebrated for what was accomplished through a readiness to invest in their convictions by acting upon them.

And at the pinnacle of this list of unlikely saintly heroes, although separated now by a chapter division missing from the original, stands Jesus, faith's pioneer and ultimate exemplar:

> *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12.1-2)*

It is so important that we grasp the kernel of biblical faith, of the faith of Jesus himself, for it has become buried beneath centuries of credal and doctrinal accretions that clothe faith in various beliefs that invite or demand assent. But these are secondary to and dependent upon faith's originating impulse which can be described as a trusting openness to the otherness of being and the being of others, yielding investments of the self in concrete actions which create space for divine encounter woven within the fabric of human relating.

The late Wilfred Cantwell-Smith, formerly Professor of the Comparative History of Religion at Harvard University and author of a number of ground-breaking books on faith, describes it in these terms:

> *The Christian movement arose not as a body of persons who believed that Jesus was the Christ, but as an upsurge of a new recognition in human history: a sudden new awareness of what humanity can be, is, all about; the dawning of a new insight into what, what had previously been called divine could, and should, be understood as meaning (God is not simply high and lifted up, in the sanctuary; He is a carpenter in a small town ...); a new*

recognition of human potentialities, one's own, one's neighbours, the proletariat's, the drunkard's. Participants in this movement did not think that they believed anything ... It is not what they believed that is significant, but the new faith that the belief-system gave a pattern to, and was generated by. (Belief and History, 87-88)

What a far cry that is from how faith and belief are understood today. If someone asks you, 'Do you believe in God?' what they probably have in mind is something along the lines of, 'Do you believe that God exists?', which is both a strange and hugely ambitious, if not arrogant, inquiry.

It is strange because if you were asked instead, 'Do you believe in Ian Wallis?', the likelihood is that you would understand the question in a significantly different way. And it is ambitious to the point of arrogance because it implies that God's existence is dependent upon someone's belief which is as absurd as claiming that my existence is contingent upon it also.

If you think about it, the reality of God has nothing to do with what you or I choose to believe; however, a trusting faith invested in particular kinds of action orientates us towards and opens us up to the possibility of God.

And this is precisely what we find in Jesus' ministry. Consider the healing narratives, one of which is narrated in our gospel reading, faith is identified not with beliefs, but with concrete investments of trust: the blind man's persistent cry for mercy; the woman suffering from a haemorrhage who burrows through the crowd; the friends of the paralyzed man who carry him from afar and dig up the roof; the Gentile woman who refuses to be dismissed as inferior or beyond the pale; the Roman centurion who is willing to ask a Galilean peasant for help; the cured leper who returns to offer thanks. Each and every one of them: trusting investments of the self, facilitating encounter with Jesus through which 'God' happens.

And the same is the case throughout the ministry Jesus and his apprentices undertook. It is a ministry characterised by disciplines and practices that transcend the constraints of a given situation creating new possibilities of

human being and of relating beyond the self. I have described these in some details in a booklet available on the card stall in the foyer, entitled 'The Artistry of Faith', but, briefly, let me mention three of them.

Firstly, the practice of forgiveness which for Jesus is all about release, rooted in the ancient Hebrew aspiration of the Jubilee – release from sources of oppression, inhumanity, diminishment, dislocation, self-aggrandizement as a means of experiencing grace and finding the freedom to take responsibility for one's own life.

Secondly, the practice of hospitality which for Jesus was as much about justice, inclusion and reconciliation as it was about celebrating the blessings of life, engendering a sense of worth and affording a glimpse of what is possible within a dispensation of grace.

And, thirdly, the practice of loving in which devotion to God is expressed through serving not only the lovely and loveable, but also the unlovely and unlovable, thereby disclosing a source of inspiration capable of redrawing the contours of human identity and behaviour.

Each case, a trusting faith invested in particular kinds of action, orientating towards and opening up the possibility of God. In one sense there is nothing exclusively Christian about this, which encourages us, I think, to acknowledge that at its most elemental, faith is an integral quality of being human, rather than an acquired trait of being religious. Wilfred Cantwell-Smith expresses it in these terms and with these words I finish.

> *Faith, then, so far as one can see as one looks out over the history of our race, is an essential human quality. One might argue that it is the essential human quality: that it is constitutive of man (sic) as human; that personality is constituted by our universal ability, or invitation, to live in terms of, a transcendent dimension, and in response to it. Certainly the human everywhere is, and from the beginning has been, open to a quality of life in oneself, in one's neighbour, and in the universe that lifts one above the merely mundane and the immediate, and means that one may be always in*

part but is never totally simply a product or a victim of circumstance. One does not merely react, but rather is open, both individually and in corporate groups, to sources of aspiration, of inspiration, of vision, of obligation, beyond what is given in one's immediate environment. A true understanding of humankind involves a recognition of our potentiality for faith. (Faith and Belief, 129)

Three

God

(Exodus 3. 1 – 15 & Matthew 11. 16 – 19, 25 – 30)

CREDO IN DEUM, we come to our final sermon in this short series in which we have attempted to take a fresh look at the affirmation, 'I believe in God'. We began by reflecting on selfhood – on what it means to be a person. We explored how biblical insights invite us to discover our authentic selves within a nexus of relationships of interdependence, before concluding that relationality is not so much something that we do but constitutive of who we are. For this reason, as relationally-constituted beings belonging within a web of relatedness as expansive as we possess the courage and the imagination to inhabit, our humanity and personhood are inextricably linked to those of others.

In the second sermon our focus shifted to faith. We noted that in much of the bible, faith is not primarily a matter of assenting to certain propositions, less still about affirming God's existence, but of personal investments of trust, finding expression in particular kinds of action, orientating towards and opening up the possibility of God.

Now, whatever we say about God in this sermon grows out of these two insights, because the destinations we reach emerge from the journeys we undertake. How we understand ourselves and the nature of faith determine to a large extent our approach to the question of God.

For instance, if we were to adopt a more individualistically centred sense of self and understand faith more in terms of assent or affirmation, then we would be inclined to objectify God through seeking evidence for God's existence as well as attempting to identify God's defining characteristics. From this perspective, 'I believe in God' within a Christian context would

mean something along the lines of, 'I have concluded that there are persuasive grounds for affirming the reality of an all-powerful, all-knowing, ever-loving, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.'

It is not my intention to engage with such an approach, but rather to acknowledge it as an alternative and one that many Christian believers adopt. However, it is not the approach that grows out of the understanding of selfhood and faith our reflections have yielded to date.

From this perspective, God is not something or someone we either believe in or do not believe in; rather, as persons who find their integrity in relation to others, we trustingly invest ourselves in a world beyond our making. But more of that later.

Firstly, we need to make space for encountering the divine, as in the account of Moses on mount Horeb when, tending the flocks of his father-in-law, Jethro, he experienced a moment of transcendence in the form of compassion for an enslaved people and a vocation to liberate them from their Egyptian captors. When Moses inquired about this source of transcendence, he receives an enigmatic response, 'I am who I am', although the original Hebrew could also be translated 'I will be who I will be' – pointing to a mysterious otherness, defying definition.

And for us to make space for encountering the divine, we need, paradoxically, to let go of the God we believe in.

There is a story preserved about a Zen Buddhist master of the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE) by the name of Lin-Chi who, when instructing his pupils in the way of non-attachment, would say, 'if you want to get the kind of understanding that accords with Dharma (ie the fundamental principle underpinning all things), never be misled by others. Whether you're facing inward or facing outward, whatever you meet up with, just kill it! If you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha ... *(The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-Chi).*

This somewhat stark and hyperbolic language was meant to alert his disciples to the danger of projection – of fashioning Buddha in one's own image, so to speak. And what applies within Buddhism is no less apposite within Christianity. As psychological and sociological analyses of religion have identified, the god concept lends itself to being imbued with those characteristics and qualities able to address our deepest fears and anxieties as well as to authorise our profoundest aspirations and hopes.

So long as we need God to be a certain way in order to sure up our worlds, then we remain less open to the possibility of encountering the God who is. We can need God too much! Paradoxically, it is only when we have come to terms with the constraints of existence without recourse to a celestial solution that we become genuinely open.

Equally, we must be ready to let go of the God we don't believe in. At theological college, I remember being informed that some clerical cassocks are supplied with 39 buttons to remind the wearer of the *Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion of the Church of England*; however, were you to view such a garment after twenty years of ministry, few buttons would remain as the articles no longer believable had been jettisoned en route.

If needing God too much can be an obstacle, then requiring God to be credible and understandable by finite minds (even when they are as expansive as those characterizing the congregation of St Mark's) can be no less constraining. In truth, any God that was entirely credible and comprehensible is no less likely to be an human invention than a deity conceived on the psychologist's couch, so to speak.

In my experience, projection and prejudice are two divine Avitas requiring elimination, along with those Buddhas of Lin-Chi's students.

Where does that leave us? Well, hopefully less cluttered with a clearer focus and a healthy vulnerability – more able to appreciate what animated the humanity of faith's ultimate pioneer and exemplar. Running through the gospels is an implicit testimony and one which, being implicit, is easily overlooked.

To what do I refer? Jesus' responsiveness to transcendence. A capacity for perceiving the potential of any given situation, unconstrained by appearance, circumstance or precedent, and then for investing personally and wholeheartedly in it so that what was initially perceived is, to some measure, realised.

I am aware that is an extremely dense description, but hopefully one that will become clearer by means of illustration. Take, for example, Jesus' sense of self. Remember, he grew up in rural Galilee within a small township where the standard of living was meagre at best. Eking out an existence was the principle preoccupation, with familial kinships and community allegiances defining identity, affording protection and increasing the likelihood of survival.

Yet, for all that, we find Jesus relating on a much broader basis, threatening his own reputation and livelihood, as well as those of his own. We find him among compatriots colluding with Rome or wealthy Jewish land-owners extorting taxes from those least able to pay, among Samaritans and Gentiles as well as those in quarantine because of disease or oppression, among social outcasts, evil-doers and bandits, among the hungry, the destitute and the hopeless.

It seems that, for Jesus, such people belonged to his story and engendered within him a loving response that would in anyone else be reserved for kith and kin. Why did we do that? How was he able to do that?

Or again, Jesus' sense of the sacred. There is no reason to think that he was particularly well-educated or had received theological training to be a religious authority or leader. For the likes of Jesus, access to God was mediated through the Jerusalem Temple and its cult, as well as through meditating on and performing Torah, God's Law.

But, according to our earliest sources, Jesus is remembered as one who encountered God through human experience to the extent that he married love of God (cf Deuteronomy 6.4-5) with love of neighbour (Leviticus 19.18) and even of one's enemies – for him, these were discrete, but inseparable (Mark 12.28-31; Luke 6.27).

He found no need to seek mediators to gain access to God's good favour. An open table at which all could share the blessings of food and friendship was as much, if not more, an altar as any on mount Zion.

He perceived God's presence within nature as well as in human endeavour and interaction. The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, like yeast a woman took and mixed, like a merchant in search of fine pearls, like a net thrown into the sea (Mark 4.30-31; Luke 13.21; Matthew 13.45-47). 'A sower went out to sow ...', 'A man planted a vineyard ...', 'A man went out early in the morning to hire labourers ...' (Mark 4.3; 12.1; Matthew 20.1).

It's as if life is imbued with transcendence for those willing and able to entrust themselves to it:

> *Jesus said, 'But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.' (Matthew 11.16-19)*

Now, what it means for us to believe in God, to draw on the imagery of this passage, is *to discern the music and to dance to its rhythm*. Trustingly and wholeheartedly, to invest ourselves in a world imbued with transcendent possibility within which we discover our integrity in relation to that which is beyond us, yet a part of us.

And we are able to do that, as we noted last week, through embracing the artistry of faith - those insights and practices which characterised Jesus' faith and which radically define all faith that flows from and is rooted in his: the habit of prayer; the practice of forgiveness; the pursuit of wisdom; the offering of hospitality; the discipline of loving; the vocation to service. This is how we create space for divine encounter. This is how we participate in the transcendence of God.

We could stop at this point. Certainly, it would be the safer option; but, it seems to me, that we would be less than honest to Jesus' witness to God if we did not recognise, on top of all that has been said so far, the centrality of his relationship with the one he referred to as *Abba*, Aramaic for 'my father'.

Such personal language for God is as reassuring to some as it is incomprehensible to others and, in all probability, was ever thus. Imagines of an old man with a beard on a cloud come to mind, along with William Blake's striking portrayals of 'The Ancient of Days'.

I wonder if, at this juncture, it helps to look upon Jesus as an *embodied parable of human being*. As we know, Jesus' parables are narrative invitations to enter a world which initially looks familiar and appealing, but which, once within, becomes strange and revealing in some way – yielding new perspectives and fresh opportunities, enabling us to see ourselves and others differently.

Similarly, for many of us, Jesus seems sufficiently familiar and appealing that we respond to his invitation to share his faith and, to some measure, to embrace his kingdom agenda and to pattern our lives on his. And, as we do, perhaps we should not be so surprised if gradually, imperceptibly, we find ourselves drawn into a subtle communing, a personal relating, not with the God we believe in, nor with the God we don't, but with the transcendent Reality animating Jesus' humanity and ours also.

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