

Sunday 26 May 2024 – Trinity Sunday: ‘Go on asking questions...’ – Jonathan Willimason

‘Questions are essential to developing our faith’. That is the heart of Jonathan Williamson’s reflections on this Trinity Sunday.

Readings:

Isaiah 6:1-8. JJohn 3:1-17

Sermon: ‘Go on asking questions...’ - Jonathan Williamson

I wonder if you could recall quite quickly some of the many questions asked in the Bible? Don’t panic – I am not going to ask you to turn to your neighbour in the pew and discuss this. But there may be some questions that immediately spring to mind, including perhaps “Who is my neighbour?” Another may be one we express quite frequently, and with some feeling of desperation or despondency: “How long, O Lord?” I did a bit of research and found that Jesus himself asks over 130 questions in the gospels. On many occasions, Jesus asks questions in response to questions, sometimes admonishing or confusing the questioner. Questions put us on the spot – but they also challenge and shape our faith.

I pondered on the importance of questions as I read the gospel and the passage from Isaiah, each featuring questions: “Whom shall I send and who will go for us?” and “How can anyone be born after having grown old?”. The latter question from Nicodemus the Pharisee is a natural and understandable metaphysical question from someone trying to understand what Jesus is talking about. As sometimes happens, we can feel sorry for the questioners as they are admonished in some way for their failure to understand who Jesus is, and what his mission is. Similarly, we may recall occasions when we have realised that something of our understanding of God needed to change or develop in order to deepen our faith and relationship with God.

Some of us may be wondering, on Trinity Sunday, how we might be able to understand or explain to another person trinitarian theology. What does it mean? How can that be? Well, I am not going down a well-trodden path of explaining the Trinity as it is beyond my pay-grade, but I do want to ponder on how the asking of questions is essential in building up our faith, and our usefulness in mission.

Questions often arise in me whenever I worship at another church, especially if they do things differently. Last Sunday, we went to worship at another church in the diocese. Sometimes I find that a change of scenery, and a change of liturgy, can throw some light on elements of the Christian faith or calendar I may never have understood fully, or whose meaning may have become faded through repetition.

Cath and I used regularly to holiday in Buckden in Wharfedale, and we would worship at St Michael’s in Hubberholme – a small hamlet containing one church, one farm, and a very good pub that had been frequented by J B Priestley. In the church the architecture is such that the celebrant has their back to the congregation during the Eucharist. It is not something I am used to, but it got me questioning why the position of the altar matters, and why churches have them in different places, and move them about.

I had a training placement at St Peter’s Greenhill about seven years ago, and during their morning Eucharist a bell was sounded as specific points of the Eucharist by the crucifer – a practice that intrigued me and alerted me to the different symbolisms in the eucharist practised in different traditions.

Likewise, last week, I was struck at the end of their Pentecost service when the Easter candle was symbolically extinguished, but not before a light was taken from it and was used to illuminate dozens of candles distributed to the congregation during the final hymn. Now, I am prepared to accept that I must have seen an Easter candle extinguished before, but on this occasion – possibly as I was in unfamiliar surroundings – the symbolism hit home pretty powerfully. Much as the stripping of the altar on Maundy Thursday – done traditionally so profoundly at St Mark’s - carries such a powerful message, the extinguishing of the Easter candle resonated with me so much. It raised questions – why do they do it this way? What does the extinguishing of the candle mean?

After pondering on this I came to understand the meaning more deeply. The extinguishing of the candle felt sad initially – something being taken away from us. But it was also encouraging. I felt like I was being told: Christ has ascended; Pentecost has been and gone; it is now up to me and you to keep the light shining. Now that may not be a particularly new revelation to many of you here – it may well be an obvious point, but I wanted to share that sometimes I need a reminder of why we are all doing this.

Questions are essential in developing our faith, though sometimes the impetus to ask them is not helpful. We may find ourselves questioning our faith as a direct result of comparing our Christianity with others. In Isaiah, the prophet speaks in a way that reveals his own inadequacies. Sometimes we may have found ourselves in situations where we don’t seem to measure up to the model of faith seen in others: others seems to be brilliant at leading intercessions, or writing liturgy, or discerning god’s voice, or writing outstanding sermons. Whilst questions may inevitably arise if we see light shining in others, the comparison can often lead to doubting the integrity of our own walk with God.

Rather, in Isaiah, the prophet does not feel inadequate by comparing himself to others, but in the presence of God – “my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts” – it is an awareness of the glory of God, and the concern that he is not worthy as he is a man of unclean lips and lives among others of unclean lips. But then there is a realisation that we are made clean by God – through the vision of a hot coal touching and cleaning those unclean lips, and (in the gospel) through the Son of God being lifted up. And in Isaiah, the next question from God, “Whom shall I send and who will go for us?” is answered with an immediate “Here am I, send me” – unable to resist the call of God’s love.

So, I would encourage us all to continue to ask questions on our faith journeys, and to sit with these questions which may well come from God. Indeed, if we are not finding questions arising then it could indicate that we have become a little comfortable in our faith, perhaps. I am encouraged by Nicodemus in his questioning, and I am not discouraged by some of the challenging answers Jesus often provides. Mission flows from our awareness of who God is, and we are blessed with the presence of God who accompanies us and gives us the light to carry on after the Easter candle has been extinguished.

Amen.

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