

Holy Trinity 8th Dec 2019

This is advent.

How would we paint a picture, today, of the God whose arrival we expect at Christmas? What does our God look like?

What about this picture of Christ above the altar sitting regally with an orb in his hand – or does our God have a sword - like St Martin, or that nasty looking pointy thing that St Michael has: then there is St Oswald – another sword: even our diocesan crest, our logo, up there on the left of the dove, has a sword crossing its keys. OR perhaps a knitted cuddly lamb is a better image for us?

Our readings speak of power, Judgement and righteousness. John the Baptist says he is not worthy to even carry Jesus' sandals: and he describes Jesus as having a winnowing fork in his hand – meanwhile Isaiah talks of wisdom, judgement, counsel and understanding – a mighty God who will decide with equity for the meek.

Is our picture complete – a Madmax God sword in hand – I suggest not!

In Luke chapter 15 there are three well known parables: (i) There is the shepherd¹ who leaves the 99 sheep to find the one that is lost (ii) There is the woman who lights a lamp and sweeps her house till she finds a lost coin and then (iii) these two lead straight in to the parable of the prodigal son. These three parables appear on the surface to be about forgiveness – the redemption of the lost – sheep, coin or son.

But look at them again, as it were, back to front and we see three contrasting pictures of God. It is God who is doing the looking and finding. So God is likened – yes to a stereotypical patriarchal father who has wealth enough to divide his possessions to give an inheritance to the prodigal son – but also to a woman in a domestic scene sweeping her house AND to a shepherd.

Sheep are not in fact cuddly animals but dirty – they do not use loo paper. A shepherd with a sheep slung across their shoulder – well! So the Jews at the time considered shepherds unclean – low life. Jesus in a radical departure from the norm depicts God as a woman and unclean low-life, as well as a father.

Some with buckets of testosterone might want to pray to an ALL MIGHTY GOD perhaps with an imaginary sword of righteousness in his hand, for others this is very off-putting.

¹ NRSV say "you" not a shepherd but in the reality of the time "you" would delegate the looking after sheep to a shepherd, which might act for all of the village. See Kenneth Bailey *The Cross and the Prodigal*

Contrast a vision of God sitting in judgement with the activeness of the shepherd seeking, the woman sweeping and the prodigal son's father running to embrace the son.

When Jesus taught us to pray "Our Father" he was not only moving us away from a picture of God in the OT for whom, in Exodus², Moses had to hide in a crack of a rock lest he saw God's face and die, but to God who is head of our family, a loving parent figure (and I would add - not necessarily male) AND a God we can speak to in our own language. Jews would have prayed in classical Hebrew³ – Jesus taught his disciples to pray in the every-day language of conversation, Aramaic – so we pray to OUR God, the God of our picture, and to our God – in our language.

BUT as Voltaire is reported to have said "God made us in his own image – we have been trying to return the compliment ever since!"

If our image is - Too much soft pink cuddliness then we belittle the power of God – John describes God wielding an axe and burning the chaff in unquenchable fire. Too much macho stuff and we miss the yearning of a mother or father God seeking us out, clothing us like the prodigal son in the best cloak and commanding a feast for our welcome.

Our picture does not have to be pixel perfect nor our language more erudite than an Aramaic grunt.

John in our gospel passage calls us, in this advent, to approach our God and repent. Well – How? As miserable offenders – thinking of the fire John speaks about, or do we look at the actions of the God Luke describes – the shepherd searches for the lost sheep, the woman lights a lamp, and brushes her whole house to find the lost coin and the prodigal son's father runs to meet him

We see a God who yearns to forgive.

However, these three Luke passages do not say what happens after the sheep or the coin has been found or after the welcome home feast of the prodigal son. John the Baptist does.

Perhaps when John says that the axe will strike the tree that does not bear fruit or that the chaff will be burnt by unquenchable fire he does not describe the damnation of the likes of the Pharisees and Sadducees, but what will happen to us.

² Exodus 33:20

³ Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus through middle eastern eyes* p95

Unquenchable does not mean everlasting but just too hot to put out. Repentance is not just saying “sorry” but a turning to God, placing ourselves in the hands that care for us, to a God who will not hesitate to “improve us”. Fire is a metaphor for a powerful purifying force like the smelting of gold. John tells us that Jesus will baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire. This is what we turn to.

So there are 16 shopping days to Christmas, we are, in advent as the church says, waiting and praying for the Christ child. Or in practice running around in ever smaller circles as we shop and decorate, or perhaps sitting and ruing the fact that Christmas does not have a magic sparkle for us. Whatever, this is a time to add a few brush strokes to develop our picture of God. To respond to John the Baptist’s call, to repent, perhaps just a grunt to an ill-formed hazy impressionistic picture of God.

Because as John promises ...

the good news is that the kingdom of God has come near!

Amen

Readings Isaiah 11:1-10, Matthew 3:1-12